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G. Warman



# ODDS AND ENDS

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# ODDS AND ENDS

## I THE SPARE BED

“WHAT is the matter? What has happened?” asked Aunt Lizzie. “Just open the window and find out,” she added, with her usual brisk decision.

It was nine o’clock on a dull September evening, and we two ladies were seated side by side in a 40 h.p. Daimler, which had suddenly come to a full stop on a country road, in the west of Ireland. On either hand stretched a wire expanse of dark mysterious country, to which the white waving bog cotton gave a ghostly, weird appearance. Black water in neighbouring bog-holes flashed back on us like phantom eyes, a dazzling reflection of the motor’s huge lamps. Undoubtedly our outlook was sombre and discouraging—as if the land nurtured some secret sorrow that no stranger could properly understand. The moon had not yet risen, but was shyly peeping at us from behind a low range of distant hills; not a soul was in sight, nor a sound to be heard, except the cry of a belated curlew, and the voices of our men; the car itself had ceased to throb.

As the chauffeur came to the window, and touched his cap, my aunt said:

“Have you missed the road, Watkin? Or is it a breakdown?”

"I'm afraid it's a bit of both, ma'am. You see, these 'ere cross-country roads is terrible puzzling, and I'm thinking we took the wrong turn about three mile back. Then there's been a kind of a mishap to the car—this extra twenty miles and bad road has done it. If we had stopped at Mulligooley for the night I was going to overhaul her, and have her all right for the morning."

Watkin (an old servant) was obviously aggrieved; he had no sympathy with his mistress's continual craving to push on, and would have preferred to spend the night in a poky country hotel, sup and smoke comfortably, and brag a little about his car.

"But surely we ought to be near the station by this time. I'll get out and have a look round." As she spoke, my aunt nimbly descended, and I followed. For her fifty-five years, she was an extraordinarily active and energetic person.

Gaze around as we might, there was no sign of lights, or station, and, as far as one could judge by appearances, we four people, standing by an empty motor, were alone in a world of brooding solitude.

"Do you think, Watkin, we have *any* chance of getting on?"

"Well, ma'am, I'm afraid not. You see, if it was only a burst tyre—we might manage—but—" he coughed behind his dogs skin glove.

But he was too wise to say "I told you so." This foolish late trip had been made entirely against his warning and advice; and behold us with night at hand, stranded on a desolate bog road, apparently out of humanity's reach. My aunt, Miss Elizabeth Barrett, and I, had been making a tour through Ireland, and so far everything had gone smoothly; roads, weather, motor, even the accommodation at inns was better than we anticipated. We had visited Portrush, the Giant's Causeway, Dublin, Wicklow, Killarney,

Connemara, and were now on our way to Queenstown—and England.

"I expect this is *the* adventure at last!" suggested my aunt cheerfully; "it would be too bad to leave Ireland without one."

"If it is the adventure," I answered, "it is not of the description I care for. I——"

"Of course not," she interrupted, "but you are three and twenty—I know *your* kind!"

"So I suppose we shall spend the night sitting in the road?" I grumbled.

"No, no, that is not to be thought of, with your delicate chest. We shall get a bed somewhere. Ah!" in a tone of triumph, "look over to the left, on the rising ground—there is a light—two lights—it's a house!" Then, raising her voice, she said to the footman, "Jopp! I see a cottage on that hill. Take one of the car lamps, and go and ask if they can give us a night's lodging."

"Yes, ma'am," said Jopp, and presently he set off with, as it seemed to me, considerable reluctance, in the direction of this beacon. Meanwhile we remained in the motor—whilst Watkin grovelled beneath it—and watched the lamp flickering over the bog, and taking a surprisingly zig-zag course.

"I was sure there would be some house," said my companion complacently, "and I do hope the bed will be clean! It will be rather fun for once, won't it?"

Her character was optimistic, active, and restless. She gave the impression of being determined to get all she could out of what remained to her of life—since her youth and middle age had been cruelly cramped and sacrificed.

My aunt was slim and erect, with thin clear-cut profile, keen blue eyes, beautiful white hair, and a very strong will. And why not? A spinster lady, with no encumbrance, no ailing relatives, and four thousand

a year, can well afford one. Aunt Liz had not long enjoyed such easy circumstances. Most of her life had been absorbed in assiduous attendance on a hypochondriacal old godfather; her spring and summer had passed in housekeeping, nursing, reading aloud, listening to continuous grumbling, scolding, and symptoms and accompanying the invalid to endless foreign cures. Such had been her existence. For this servitude she received sixty pounds a year, and washing; but when her tyrant died it was found that he had not been ungrateful, and had left her an unexpectedly large fortune, and, late as it was, she lost no time in becoming a live woman ! A cottage in the country, a flat in town, and a motor, were soon among her possessions, but for the greater part of the year she lived in the car. Watkin, her late godfather's coachman, had learnt this new job ; Jopp, the footman, was his nephew, so we were quite a little family party ! My sister and I were orphans—she, however, had a husband. Aunt Liz had always been more than good to us ; I was supposed to be her favourite of the two, because I had her nose, was rather delicate, and not the least afraid of her sharp tongue. For some time I was a probationer in the Children's Hospital in Great Ormonde Street, but my health broke down, and I was now companion to my aunt—and she was *my* nurse !

Although we did not admit the fact, I think there is no doubt that we were both in the enjoyment of a comfortable little nap, when we were disturbed by the return of Jopp—looking extraordinarily hot and mud-stained.

“ Well ? ” we asked in the same breath.

“ I am very sorry, ma'am, but the people at the house—it's a full mile away—mostly talk Irish. I made out that they have no beds—they want what there are themselves ; but if you wouldn't mind settin' up in the kitchen they make no objection.”

"No, I daresay not!" rejoined my relative, throwing up her chin, "and one hears so much of Irish hospitality! I intend to sleep there, and I shall go over and interview her myself—I suppose it's a woman?" appealing to Jopp.

"Yes, ma'am, quite a crowd of women—a houseful, I should say. It's a rough sort of place for ladies; it looked like a kind of wedding party."

"A party—that settles it! Millie" (to me) "we will start at once—wrap up well. I am *afraid* we shall have rather a disagreeable walk, but it will be something to spend a night in a real Irish cottage. Jopp will carry our dressing-bags, and Watkin the lamp. No one will touch the car, and anyway, they cannot carry it away, so we will all sleep out."

Here I must draw a decent veil over our muddy excursion, our climbing of gates, evading of bog-holes, and wading through fields. At last we turned into a deep lane; this led up to a yard, in which stood an enormous manure-heap, several empty turf-carts, and a long, slated house of one story. There were lights in three windows, and my aunt hammered vigorously on the door, which was immediately opened by a tall woman with black hair and high cheek-bones. She stood in a sort of little entrance, from which one could see into a kitchen with a roaring turf fire. It appeared to be full of people.

Aunt Liz, in her high, clear English accent, made her request with civil confidence. A bed for her niece and self, and permission for the men to sit up in the kitchen; she promised to give no trouble, and would pay well.

"I am terribly sorry, me lady, but I can't take ye in nohow," declared the woman; "we are shockingly put about—and the house is throng as it is."

My aunt edged her way further and looked eagerly round the kitchen; there were three or four men

smoking, half a dozen women staring, and one very old crone in a large white cap hunched up inside the big chimney shook her stick at us, and gabbed in Irish.

"Have you no place you could put us into?" enquired my never-to-be-denied relative; "our car has broken down—we really cannot remain in the road all night; my niece has a dreadful cold. I am prepared," and she looked full into the woman's eyes, and I knew she was thinking of adventure, "to pay handsomely."

"An' what wud ye call handsome?" asked the other, in a high, whining key.

"Say three pounds."

"Is it three pounds? No, me lady. I really couldn't upset the house for that. What wud ye say to six?—maybe then I'll be talkin' to ye—and let the two men have an air of the fire, and give you and the girleen a good bed between yees."

"What—six pounds—for one night! Why, it's more than a London hotel."

"Bedad, yes, I'm charging yees, because it's *not* a hotel, and for the raison that I'll have to square it with me Gran—for it's *her* bed—ye might see her there in the corner crouched up like an old wet hen. If ye will just stand outside the door a couple of minutes, I'll argufy it out wid her—but she is terribly crabbed in herself, and it's like enough she'll pull the head off me!"

It was a novel and humiliating experience to be turned out of doors, there to await a verdict—Watkin and Jopp, too—and Jopp, who was young and foolish, stared at his uncle and winked expressively.

Meanwhile, within, a fierce discussion raged; loud sentences in an unknown tongue actually reached the would-be guests; it sounded as if a furious quarrel and real battle of words were taking place, with angry shouts and stamping, but after ten minutes' uproar the

door was flung wide and the woman of the house reappeared.

"I have it fixed up elegant! Walk in, if ye plase, and welcome," and she ushered our party into her kitchen. The men stood up, and shuffled with their feet, and, with Irish courtesy, extinguished their pipes; the women stared, the old crone chattered like an angry monkey, and pointed significantly to the door.

Hot strong tea and hot well-buttered soda-bread were offered, and found delicious.

"It will be extra, ye understand," whispered the hostess behind her hand, "two shilling—but I felt sure ye'd be the better of a mouthful, whilst they were redding up the room, and getting yer bed made."

In ten minutes we were established in the bedroom, which opened out of another apartment at the opposite side of the front and only door, and was boarded, white-washed, and looked, though bare, unexpectedly possible. There was a wooden bed, a large green wooden press, a chest of mahogany drawers, and looking-glass, a washstand, and numerous religious pictures nailed on the wall—at least four of the Blessed Virgin and the Sacred Heart—over the bed hung a large crucifix.

"We won't take off all our clothes," said my aunt, as the door closed, "the sheets are sure to be damp—though they are quite clean. I see she has left us matches. Oh, what a luxury to lie down. B-r-r-r, but the sheets are cold!" and she gave a shiver. To me, the sheets felt as if they had been iced, but I was too sleepy and tired to mind, and soon passed into the land of dreams.

I think I must have been asleep three or four hours—it seemed like three or four minutes—when I was awakened by my aunt shaking me vigorously. She was sitting up in bed.

"Millie—how you do sleep!" she said. "There's a noise in the press that awoke me. Listen!"

As I could hear nothing, I naturally asked:

"What is it?"

"Hush!" she said impatiently. For a time there was no sound. It seemed to me we were like two fools, sitting up side by side in dead silence in the dark.

At last—yes!—certainly there was a movement in the press—a sort of sliding and shuffling, a bump!

"There!" she exclaimed, hastily lighting the candle. "You hear! Now I intend to see what it is. It's my opinion there's a man in the wardrobe!"

As she spoke, my valiant aunt sprang out of bed, candle in hand, turned a handle, and flung the door wide open. Then she gave a loud quavering screech, as something in the wardrobe toppled forward, and fell upon her bodily.

I flew out of bed, just in time to see that the corpse of a little wizened old man, in a brown wrapper—or habit—had tumbled from the press, and lay at my aunt's feet; and in spite of my excellent hospital training, for the moment I lost all self-control, and screamed too!

Our united shrieks brought the assembled household to the spot. The hostess burst in first, demanding: "What's this at all, at all?" Then as she caught sight of the corpse, "Oh, Holy Fathers! there's for ye now!"

"An' well served," added another woman, thrusting herself forward, "an' serves ye right, Maggie Behan, letting out the death-bed from under yer old granddada for lucre—and the breath hardly out of him, sure," she continued in a shriller key and with impassioned gestures. "It's no wonder on earth the poor old man made a disturbance and annoyance, and come out of the press ye had him put away in. Faix, never ye fear, he'll have it *in* for ye yet!"

The body of the aged grandfather had, with my assistance, now been lifted on to the bed from which we had so unceremoniously ousted him.

“What does it all mean?” demanded my aunt, speaking with as much dignity as was compatible with a pair of black satin knickers; then snatching up a skirt, she wound it hastily about her and boldly met the eyes of half a dozen men, including her own servants.

“Faix, then I’ll tell yer ladyship, and no lie about it,” volunteered a little swarthy man; “him that’s dead was me granddada—there’s herself in the kitchen. He was mortal old; we were going to wake him—just a small bit of a wake—when ye come, first yer man, then yerself, and wouldn’t take no. Me wife felt bad to be denying the two nice English ladies a bed, and the bog air so cold—so—so—and seeing the money was good, and wanted, we laid our heads together and settled to turn out the old chap for the night—and have our wake without him. Sure, don’t I know well enough he’d be glad to accommodate any lady for six sovereigns. We had a notion of puttin’ him up the chimney, but for his new habit, and we made him all right and tight in the press—but”—and he looked round—“his legs give way. Ye see, he hasn’t the use of them, this while back. Well, it’s all wan to him, and I hope yer ladyship will take the bed at half-price—ye had half a night, ye see. I give ye me honour ‘twas the best we could do for ye, and the money will bury him elegant, and as for him disturbin’ ye, I’m sorry he didn’t let ye sleep it out.”

“If you will be so good as to withdraw, we will dress,” said my aunt, who had recovered her self-possession; “and if it is all the same to you, we’ll sit in the kitchen till daybreak, and then perhaps you can send us on a car to the junction.”

The remainder of that night we did sit in the

kitchen, drawn up within a large and hospitable circle. Our hostess had not realised that there was a social line of demarcation between our companions and ourselves; my aunt and Watkin shared a form, and I sat on a reversed turf-creel, squeezed in between Jopp and Maggie Behan. Tea, whisky, and porter were in steady circulation; a combination of porter and whisky struck me as a novelty, but was evidently well known to and highly appreciated by some of the company. I am sure that but for my own embarrassing proximity, Jopp would have liked to sample it.

As we sat there in the light of a huge turf-fire, I learnt more of Ireland and listened to more wit and good stories than I had ever done in my life. A tall, red-haired man, called "Foxy Pat"—who seldom smiled—kept, without the least apparent effort, and with but two or three exceptions, the kitchen in a roar. A couple who never laughed interested me greatly: a girl of my own age, but quite beautiful, the true Irish type, with black hair and wonderful blue-black eyes; the other, a young man, equally handsome, with some resemblance to the girl, straight and broad-shouldered, with a nobly-set-on head, and dark as a Spaniard. I noticed that they rarely spoke, but gazed at one another from time to time; their expression was so grave as to be almost tragic. In answer to a whispered question, Maggie Behan replied, also in a whisper:

"Them's the two McCarthys—Norah and Dermot; ye see, they can't marry, being second cousins. He is going to Ameriky on Monday—and sure, ye've only to look at them to tell yerself as their two hearts is broke."

I must confess that this piece of information had the effect of depressing my spirits to such an extent that even the brilliance of Foxy Pat's best story failed to raise them.

As soon as the light began to creep in at the window the gathering broke up, the wake—that was not a wake; the wake where the corpse had been shut in a press and its bed given to two ladies—was over. Aunt Lizzie paid up the full price agreed upon, and we partook of a parting cup of tea before we set out for the station—a distance of eight miles. Thither we were ignominiously conveyed on a turf-cart drawn by a young irresponsible long-tail, and after a most exciting drive, and several hairbreadth escapes, arrived at the railway hotel in time for an early breakfast. We had brought our bags with us, and mention that we had had a breakdown on the way—but not a word of our experience. Subsequently we retired to bed, where we enjoyed several hours of undisturbed repose. Late in the same afternoon the motor turned up in good order, none the worse for its night out—and the following day we started for Queenstown, and home.

This was our only adventure in Ireland! Aunt Lizzie—who thinks the whole incident too shocking for words—has requested me never to mention it to a soul; but I sometimes wonder if Watkin and Jopp have been equally discreet.

## II

### UNAVOIDABLY POSTPONED

A GREAT white Orient liner lay in the harbour of Colombo, with her Blue Peter flying. The coaling process was accomplished, and her passengers—who had lunched and scattered over the town and its environs—were being thus summoned to abandon Ceylon's spicy breezes for the breezes of the sea.

As the *Oriana* was homeward bound from Mel-

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bourne, naturally most of her freight were Australians—squatters and their families taking a trip to the old country, wealthy men from the big towns, tourists who had been visiting the Colonies, parsons, actors, doctors, engineers, with their corresponding women-folk.

And now a small Indian contingent had been contributed; these the so-to-speak residents of three weeks eyed with the same description of curiosity, superiority, and faint hostility which schoolboys experience with regard to new pupils.

Among the group of pale mem-sahibs, sunburnt planters, children, ayahs and green parrots, was one figure and face, well known, not merely to the captain and officers, but to several of the passengers, who hastened to offer the arrival a hearty greeting.

This individual was a certain popular sportsman who roamed the world in search of big game and "heads." The Hon. Lumley Grantham was the only son of Viscount Nesfield, and in a way the despair of his parents, who were anxious that he should remain at home and "settle," instead of which he roved about the globe, a modern wandering Jew (as sudden in his arrivals and departures), energetic, enterprising, and erratic. He had been in the Army, but the Service did not accord sufficient leave to enable an ardent sportsman to shoot in the Rockies, and to fish in New Zealand; and so, after a few years' restraint, he threw off his uniform and unbuckled his sword. He had a passion for trophies, and owned the most unique and comprehensive collection of almost every known horned animal, from a moose to a jungle sheep. To add to his collection he spared neither effort nor expense. If he heard some notable animal discussed one evening at his club, such as a rare red bull in the Shan Hills, a strange antelope in Borneo, the chances were that he would immediately look up trains and

steamers on the spot, and depart on his quest within the week. His marches and stalkings beyond the bounds of civilisation were fruitful in dangers and hardships, and his mother, who was devoted to him, lived in an agony of apprehension that some day, instead of securing his object and prize, the prize should turn the tables and make a prey of her only son ! For weeks and even months she did not hear from him—he was probably in Thibet, Somaliland, or Central America—and the unhappy lady would lie awake for hours, thinking of “ Must ” elephants, tigers, cholera, earthquakes and snakes. Oh, if Lumley would only fall in love with some nice girl, marry her, and stay at home, how happy and thankful she would be ; and she secretly vowed a window in their country church, should this blessed event ever take place. Lady Nesfield knew so many charming girls ; these she cautiously praised and brought to the notice of Lumley ; but, unfortunately, it is so seldom that a young man and his mother admire the same girl ; also Lumley’s shooting proclivities had made him wary—he, like Tennyson’s character, “ saw the snare, and he retired,” preferring his roving life, and freedom.

Lumley was now thirty-two years of age, but looked older ; tall, and without a superfluous ounce of flesh on his bones, as wiry and sinewy as a greyhound ; his skin was brown, his short hair black, and two dark, keen eyes illuminated a pleasant but not handsome face. They were honest, watchful eyes, something like those of an intelligent dog, and when they smiled they became beautiful.

Captain Grantham’s manners were easy and unaffected ; he could find something to say to everyone, from a royal duke to an Indian beater, and was equally popular with all grades of society ; a well-known character on most liners, whether to the Cape, America, Bombay, or Melbourne, he was, during his

constant trips, continually coming across former fellow-travellers.

On the present occasion, when he and his baggage came up the side, Captain Grantham received quite an ovation from half a dozen acquaintances. With one or other of these he subsequently paced the deck, and smoked and talked till the *Oriana* was well out to sea, relating thrilling shikar stories, and his recent exploits, with the gusto and enthusiasm of a schoolboy. He described the hunting down and capture of a big Rogue elephant in the Annamulley Jungle, and the notable pair of ibex horns he had brought from the Pulnay Hills.

After dinner, as he sat on deck in the starlight, talking to a matronly acquaintance, he said :

“ It seems a full ship—quite a number of girls, too—all homeward bound.”

“ Yes,” she answered, “ and some of them pretty. The two with the scarlet tam-o’-shanters are the Miss Todds, heiresses from Woorolango. And the one in the white yachting cap is said to be the belle of Sydney.”

“ And who is the dark girl who sits at the end of the first officer’s table ? ”

“ Beside a delicate lady with white hair and a bloodless face ? I do not know, except that they are Mrs. and Miss Loftus, presumably mother and daughter. The girl is devoted to the invalid, and never leaves her side ; they keep entirely to themselves.”

“ Must be rather slow for the young lady ? ”

“ No doubt it is ; but when she is spoken to she merely smiles and answers ‘ yes ’ or ‘ no.’ Conversation cannot flourish under such circumstances, can it ? ”

“ Do they know no one ? ”

“ No. No one knows them, or who they are—which amounts to the same thing.”

"She is a handsome girl, with a thundering good figure, and looks well-bred."

"Appearances are sometimes deceitful!"

"I don't know about that—one has an intuition—"

"I believe you are going to break the spell of silence, and make the lady's acquaintance."

"Yes—why not?"

"Why not, indeed? But you will find it easier said than done! She has never opened a conversation with anyone during three weeks. I've even tried to talk to her myself!"

"Ah! I see you are a little piqued."

"I am not the only one who is piqued. I think the damsel is inclined to give herself *airs*—we are possibly not good enough—but I expect she will thaw to *you*."

"Come now. I call that rather a nasty one, Mrs. Seymour! What have I done to deserve it?"

"Nothing—forgive me, and help me on with my cape, and we will take a little turn before I turn in. As for the Loftus party, they may have very good reasons for keeping all at arm's-length"—she paused and stared at him significantly—"for not wishing to know us, or us to know them," and, as she spoke, the lady rose from her chair, as if the subject were closed and done with.

Like a true sportsman, Captain Grantham was patient and pertinacious; he bided his time—but biding one's time on the trackless ocean, aboard a fast liner, is not the same thing as tracking a quarry in the pathless forest. There is a limit to postponement—a limit represented by the port of arrival.

For several days he made no progress whatever, beyond discovering that the lady was admired by the men-folk, and suspected by the ladies, who, whilst admitting the patent fact of her filial devotion, had nothing to say in her favour. There was plenty to

occupy the time among the passengers, and one sulky girl was soon overlooked—but not by Captain Grantham. She interested him; he was determined to make her acquaintance, and luck favoured him—a sudden lurch of the ship in the abominable current just off Socotra capsized the old lady's chair, and she would have been hurled across the deck had he not dashed to her assistance, caught her bodily in his arms, and saved in all respects the situation. He took the entire charge of Mrs. Loftus, personally conducted her to her cabin, and subsequently collected books, spectacles, shawl, and was thus brought into communication with the young lady, and from that moment his object was secured. She proved not at all *difficile* once the ice was broken, but a charming and captivating acquaintance. After nearly four weeks' silence, she seemed anxious to make up for lost time, and talked incessantly; she was also an admirable listener. Before they had reached Suez she had largely extended her acquaintance, and became as intimate with some of the passengers as previously she had been remote. But her first acquaintance was her chief ally; together they paced the deck for exercise, together they did problems in the papers, they played chess, and exchanged books and opinions, and sat for a long time after dinner watching the stars and the low tropical moon.

In the canal Captain Grantham, who was on the "amusement committee," helped to get up a grand concert, and prevailed on Miss Loftus to sing. He had gleaned from her mother that she had a fine voice, and also a few other talents; as he sat beside the invalid's long chair, he discovered that she was lady-like and refined; her surroundings indicated taste and money.

Rata, as the girl was called, was her only child. Mrs. Loftus was a widow returning to England, which she had quitted twenty-eight years previously. Her

husband's people came from Gloucester, and were nearly all dead.

She had lived near Christchurch, New Zealand, and only been twice to England since she and her husband had become colonists. Her brother had commanded a well-known regiment and was now a Brigadier in India.

Yes, Captain Grantham remembered to have seen him some years previously, and here was a link between them—such a very small matter will constitute a tie on board ship, especially when both the ends are anxious to be joined.

At the rehearsals for the concert, Miss Loftus discovered to her listeners a magnificent contralto voice. People vowed she was a second Melba; there was also something that thrilled and touched one's very heart-strings in the expression of her rich, full notes.

The concert took place whilst the ship was in the Canal, and the *Oriana* seemed motionless, as it wound its way through the limitless sand; the concert was, of course, packed, every seat was occupied. There were the usual banjo and guitar ditties, men's songs, a glee; then Miss Loftus stood up, all in white, and, without a note of music, sang "An Arab Love Song."

The theme, which seemed peculiarly suitable to the encompassing desert, had a weird and impressive effect, and threw a momentary spell over the entire audience. There was a wild, passionate note in the singer's voice that appealed to that something far down, hidden away and stifled, that is born in every human being.

All the world of the *Oriana* realised that they were listening to a voice entirely out of the common, to something unusual, unforgettable, and unique.

Miss Loftus presented a delightful picture; she was good to look at, as she stood up in the moonlight on the little platform—graceful, dignified, and yet so

simple; last, by no means least, so undeniably handsome.

Her second song was a simple ballad, which caused a lump to rise in the throats of her audience; but when the last notes had died away among the sands, what applause—real applause! Such was the uproar and the acclamation, that a ship which was following became extremely envious, and half inclined to despatch a boat to inquire the reason of the unusual demonstration.

A Mediterranean moon looks sympathetically on lovers. What can be more romantic than those long, idle evenings on that romantic sea? By the time Malta was sighted, Lumley Grantham, the despair of mothers (his own included), had proposed and been accepted by Rata Loftus. Although they had only known one another three weeks, time at sea means ten times more than time on land. They had no distractions, or occupation, spent at least twelve hours of the day in each other's society, and they had learnt one another's tastes and characters—so far as these may be known before marriage. She listened eagerly to his sporting adventures—he, to her descriptions of New Zealand, her vivid little sketches of Colonial life, her craving to see England and other countries, to hear operas, concerts, and, above all, to visit Bayreuth during the festival.

When the news of the engagement leaked out, it was received on board with mixed feelings—but on the whole the ship was pleased. It was a wonderful catch for the girl; but she was handsome, accomplished, and rich. Some of the women murmured among themselves that, “for all anyone knew she might be an adventuress! and the uncle, who was a General, a fraud, but they kept their suspicions to themselves.

Mrs. Loftus now became more active; the voyage

had revived her. She walked on deck, a little erect figure with a stately pose of her white head, and even discussed her plans with other ladies.

She proposed to make London her headquarters for the present, to take a furnished house, and get Rata presented—it was only March; there were sure to be May drawing-rooms.

The happy couple—they were very much in love—went ashore, and spent a day at Gibraltar in the highest spirits, chaperoned by Mrs. Loftus. It was surmised that they had despatched telegrams and letters, and, at any rate, Miss Loftus wore a handsome ring on her engaged finger when she returned to the ship, loaded with gifts of fans, quaint bits of Moorish ornaments, and a fine mantilla, which she wore at a fancy ball two evenings later as a Spanish lady, and looked a Spanish donna to the life. On their arrival in London, Mrs. and Miss Loftus drove straight to the Carlton Hotel, and Lumley Grantham joined his family in Grosvenor Place.

The next day Lord and Lady Nesfield came to call on the new arrivals, and their son's future bride.

They were not a formidable couple: he, a tall, bent, grey old man, with courteous manners; she, a pretty, impulsive little woman, enchanted that Lumley had chosen a wife at last, thankful for anyone, as long as she was not black, and prepared to be delighted with her daughter-in-law.

Rata for her part was much touched by their kind welcome, and all now went merrily as a marriage bell. Miss Loftus was handsome, healthy, ladylike; she had £25,000—quite ample, as Lumley had no occasion to marry a great fortune. Her mother was a refined and amiable woman, passionately devoted to her only child, and the attachment was most warmly returned. Rata was a girl of strong feelings, and it was patent to all that she was deeply in love with her *fiancé*. Mrs.

Loftus, who was evidently a woman of wealth, was soon established in a fashionable house at Lowndes Square, with a smart carriage and an adequate staff, and all Lumley Grantham's relatives and connections, male and female, crowded to call upon the lady of his choice.

They found her as handsome, graceful, and agreeable as they were led to expect, but perhaps a little unconventional and colonial. With respect to her voice, there could be but one opinion. She was a serious loss to the musical world, and could have made a fortune as a great *prima donna*. Invitations were showered upon 225, Lowndes Square. Miss Loftus was in continual request, and soon became a social favourite. She was a magnificent horsewoman, and rode every morning in the Row, accompanied by Captain Grantham.

Among the chorus of praise were a few discordant notes; the loudest and shrillest of these issued from the Hon. Mrs. Custance, Lord Nesfield's only sister, a lady in somewhat narrow circumstances, with two tall, talkative daughters. Her views were not rigid respecting the marrying of first cousins, and Lumley's engagement had been a shock to her, for she had always hoped that he would one day settle down, and marry either Maudie or Mag, instead of which he presented as *fiancé* a Colonial nobody, whom he had, so to speak, picked up at sea! *Who* was she? This was a question continually on her lips.

The Loftus family were undoubtedly respectable, but how was anyone to know she was one of them? And the uncle, a General, was possibly a myth. These people had no friends in London, and did not seem to know a soul.

But for all these objections Lady Nesfield found satisfactory replies. She was delighted at her son's capture—now he would be chained fast, and kept at

home. General Broome had written his congratulations, and was sending a present. Two of the Custance girls were to be bridesmaids; the wedding would take place in July, as the bride's mother was in precarious health, and anxious to see her daughter happily married, as she believed—so she told Lady Nesfield in confidence—that her own days were numbered, and she could not bear the idea of leaving Rata alone in the world.

At the present moment she had rallied sufficiently to be able to accompany her girl to the park, the play, and elsewhere.

The questions of Mrs. Custance were also on the lips and in the mind of Lady Foxrock, Lumley Grant-ham's only sister. She was undeniably one of the smart set. The childless wife of a wealthy old peer, ambition was her fetish, and, in spite of her passion for bridge, motoring, and racing, she still contrived to find time for the casting of social nets, and for bringing important intimacies into the family circle. She had always resolved that Lumley, "the wild hunter," as she playfully called him, should marry—when he *did* take the step—to the advantage of his family, and she had mentally selected one of her exclusive friends, the rather *passée* daughter of a noble duke, with a splendid connection, and a considerable dower. She never dreamt, for one moment, that Lumley would find anything more attractive abroad than his usual horns, tusks, and skins; but home he came with a bride, so to speak, in his hand—a mere colonial nobody. Lady Foxrock took an invincible dislike to her on the spot—the dislike was mutual. Rata felt herself an antagonist to this tall, sour-looking lady, with a thin, high nose, pale, arrogant eyes, and slow, disdainful airs. Lady Foxrock could not understand why men admired the colonial; in her opinion, she was frightfully second-rate. And who *was* she? How,

she asked her mother, did they know she was related to the Gloucestershire people? The uncle in India was probably a fiction! The girl had no friends in London and, for all that they could tell, might be an adventuress. Lumley's interests must be watched—he was an *idiot*, where that girl was concerned.

Naturally Lady Foxrock had been indefatigable in her endeavours to discover something about the Loftuses, but, unfortunately, New Zealand was remote, and her acquaintances in the Colonies were limited, and she had a confused idea that people who lived in Melbourne or Sydney must, as a matter of course, be intimate with those in Christchurch and Wellington!

One sleepy afternoon, at Hurlingham, kind fate placed a clue in her hand. She was sitting in one of the little tents on the lawn, enjoying tea and strawberries; her near neighbours were a large merry party of acquaintances, and they gradually intermixed. Among the group was a grey-haired, square-built gentleman, who was presented to her as Mr. Dexter, spending a few months in England after an absence of thirty years. Lady Foxrock surveyed him critically; his clothes were ill-fitting, his gloves preposterous, but his carriage, square chin, and keen eyes, gave indication of a man of character, and importance.

He sank into a chair beside the lady, and said, "It is a pretty scene," nodding his head at the numerous gay groups, the passing crowd, the lawn scattered with flower-beds, the tall trees, through which shimmered the river.

"Yes, but I've seen it so often," she drawled, "its charm has faded a little."

"Ah, well, if you had been thirty years in the colonies you would not complain of *that*."

"Oh, really, I suppose not," she answered in-

differently, her attention diverted by the sight of her brother, his *fiancé*, Mrs. Loftus, and Lady Nesfield, who were then passing. She noticed that her companion started and stared hard; he even leant forward and gazed after the group; then, as he met her glance of interrogation, he said, "I've just seen a familiar face—a face from home."

"Oh, then you are from New Zealand," she exclaimed, "and have recognised Mrs. and Miss Loftus?"

"Ah," he answered, "so you know them?"

"Yes; and you?"

"Very intimately once; but eighteen years ago they left our neighbourhood, and I entirely lost sight of them."

"Who was Mr. Loftus?" she asked abruptly.

"A prosperous gentleman who owned several large ranches, and died a year ago, leaving a fortune."

"Was he of good birth?"

"I should say so—but we don't take much account of that in the Colonies, you know."

"And Mrs. Loftus?"

"She was renowned for her philanthropy and charities. She had no children—"

"What! No children! She has a daughter—you saw her just now."

"An adopted daughter," he corrected.

"Impossible!"

"I assure you it is the case; there was no secret about it."

"There is a secret about it *now*."

"You seem interested in the family."

"I should think I am, considering that Miss Loftus is going to marry my brother—Lord Nesfield's only son."

"You don't say so!" he exclaimed, in unfeigned amazement.

"But I do—the wedding is fixed to take place in ten days' time. Shall we go outside this tent, and stroll about a little?—impossible to talk here."

"Certainly," and he moved a chair out of her way, and followed Lady Foxrock down towards the polo ground.

"I suppose there is no mistake, Mr. Dexter," she began, "and you really recognise these people?"

"I recognise Mrs. Loftus. I could swear to her anywhere, to her white face and prominent blue eyes. The girl was only two, when I last saw her, but I believe her to be the same. She was very handsome, and her name, I believe, was Rata—named after a New Zealand flower."

"Yes; it is Rata."

"There never was any concealment or mystery respecting her. The Loftuses had no family. They were passionately fond of children, and they adopted a child, and, a short time after this, they moved away to the south island; and we lost sight of them."

"Do you know who the child was?"

"Well"—with obvious reluctance—"yes, I do."

"You will tell me, won't you?" and she flashed on him a challenging glance from her small grey eyes.

A moment's silence. At last he said, "No; I would rather not. It is not my business, and you must excuse me."

"Oh, Mr. Dexter, won't you speak out? It means so much to *us*."

"There is absolutely nothing against the girl's character. I think I can assure you of that."

"Then it is her *birth*—that is the question."

"Well, she is not responsible for that, is she?"

"No-o," the negative was reluctant.

"She seems a fine, tall, beautiful young woman, and I'm sure she has been well brought up; she will be wealthy—what more do you want?"

“The truth, and nothing but the truth.”

“It is not always advisable to know the truth—sometimes silence is best.”

“And so you won’t speak,” she said impatiently, “you are inflexible?”

He bowed his head.

“Look here; we are just coming face to face with the party. Will you accost them?”

“No; I prefer not—unless Mrs. Loftus recognises me.”

They approached in a line, the two younger people handsome and radiant—Rata all in white, carrying a becoming pink sunshade—the elder ladies deep in mutual confidences. Little did they suspect that the smiling lady in grey, who had accosted them in passing, was elaborating a scheme which was to upset their happy anticipations.

“Well, Mr. Dexter,” said Lady Foxrock, “I see you are a man of honour, and respect the affairs of other people, and I must say, that, *much* as I should like to know something about my future sister-in-law, I admire your reticence immensely. We will consider our talk strictly confidential. Are you married?”

“Yes; that was my wife with the Greysons—the little woman in the blue toque.”

“You won’t mention the subject to her, will you?”

“No, certainly not. The less said the better.”

“Where are you staying?”

“At the Hyde Park Hotel—for a couple of weeks. We have not many friends in London.”

“Then I should like to do myself the pleasure of calling on Mrs. Dexter.”

“That is really very kind of you. I am sure she will be delighted to make your acquaintance.”

“And now,” said the lady, “we must go and look for our parties. They will think we are lost.”

Lady Foxrock was prompt in calling on Mrs.

Dexter. She found her twenty years younger than her husband, and of a much inferior class—a yellow-haired, shallow, over-dressed little person, who was obviously flattered by a visit from her ladyship.

Her ladyship dangled some imposing invitations before her dazzled eyes, and then began to ask cautious questions about New Zealand.

Yes, she was New Zealand born herself, not long married—she had insisted on Joe taking her to England, for a spree like ! She wanted to see the world a bit, and society. He had brought her, though all his own folk were dead—and he had no home now.

Had Mrs. Dexter ever heard of a Mrs. Loftus in her part of the world ?

Yes, ages ago—she'd almost forgotten the tale.

“ Oh, so there was a tale. How very interesting ! Has it anything to do with her adopted daughter ? ”

Mrs. Dexter nodded, and giggled.

“ The girl is in England now, you know, with Mrs. Loftus—and about to make a grand match.”

Lady Foxrock had touched the right chord ; the little colonial was filled with a sudden spasm of envy.

“ A splendid match—she ! ”

“ Yes, to the son of a lord.”

“ Oh—what ! ” and she burst out into an excited laugh. “ Well, I declare, this is too fine a joke. If they only knew—wouldn’t they be wild ! ”

“ Knew what ? ”

“ Oh, I’d better not say—it might get out. I don’t want to be a spoil-sport ; and Joe hates what he calls ‘ gossip.’ ” and she put her finger on her lips.

Lady Foxrock drew herself up and looked dignified. “ I assure you that I never gossip, Mrs. Dexter. If you can tell me who this girl was, and is, you will be doing me an enormous favour, and one I shall not forget ; but, of course, if you feel that you have no wish

to confide in me—and after all I am a stranger——” she paused, and her smile implied a threat.

After all, she was Lady Foxrock, and if she was denied this small request, good-bye to a box at the Opera, an invitation for Lady Foxrock’s fancy ball—and other delights.

“ Well, then, look here; I *will* tell you,” and she suddenly leant forward. Her visitor also approached her head, her heart beat fast—these moments are the sparks of life!

“ Miss Loftus, the adopted daughter of Mrs. Loftus, is just a——”

There was a footstep outside.

“ Hark! my husband is coming!”

“ Quick, quick, you must tell me!” cried Lady Foxrock, seizing her arm in an agony of suspense.

Mrs. Dexter once again leant forward, and whispered, and, ere her whispering had ceased, the handle rattled, and the two heads started apart, as the door opened and Mr. Dexter entered the room.

His wife had entirely recovered her self-possession and said, with incredible assurance, “ Oh, there you are, dear. I’m so glad you’ve come in while Lady Foxrock is here.”

He advanced with broad, extended palm. Lady Foxrock, who seemed embarrassed, and strangely flushed, said:

“ Yes; I’ve paid, you see, my threatened visit to your wife, and now”—rising as she spoke—“ I must positively be going. I’m such a busy person, my quarters of an hour are all filled up.”

“ I am sorry I did not come home a little sooner,” said Joe Dexter, who saw that his wife was flattered and gratified, and felt proportionately pleased.

“ I will send the cards to-morrow,” continued Lady Foxrock, “ and I shall hope to see you both on the

29th," and with a gracious handshake her ladyship swept out.

Once seated in her carriage, she felt herself trembling with excitement; a few civil words, a card of invitation, what had they not brought her? The match between Lumley and the New Zealander was practically broken off—in a few hours the notification would appear in the *Morning Post*!

She was determined to strike at once—no time like the present, and no time to be lost. She ordered her footman to drive to Lowndes Square.

Mrs. Loftus was at home, resting on the sofa in the back drawing-room. She had had an unusually fatiguing day, and looked ghastly as she struggled to her feet to receive Lady Foxrock. Her ladyship, being Lumley's sister, had the *entrée* at all hours to the temporary home of his *fiancé*. Yet Lady Foxrock was antipathetic to both Rata and her mother. She was cold, arrogant, interfering, and inquisitive—it seemed almost impossible that she could have been born a Nesfield!

"It is a little late," she said, glancing at a clock, "but I could not have slept to-night if I had not come to see you. I want to ask you something important about—Rata."

The lady's manner was menacing, and at the conclusion of her sentence the eyes of her hostess resembled those of some long-hunted animal, that the cruel hunter has tracked to its lair at last!

"What about Rata?" she faltered, as she sank into a seat; her hands were shaking visibly.

"Yes, what about Rata?" echoed a full, gay voice. "Talk of an angel, and here I am!" she added playfully as she advanced, a delightful vision in a summer gown and flowery hat.

"Darling," cried Mrs. Loftus, "run away for a little. Lady Foxrock wishes to speak about you."

"But, dearest, if Leonora is going to talk about *me*, don't you think you are rather cruel to banish me? Curiosity is one of my strongest characteristics!"

"Enough of this nonsense," thought the visitor, and, turning roughly on Mrs. Loftus, she said, "I wish Rata to remain here—it is essential"; and then, turning quickly to Rata, she added, "If you are so naturally inquisitive, has it never occurred to you to wonder who you are?"

"Oh, my God!" murmured Mrs. Loftus under her breath, "it has come! Rata, as you love me, leave me here alone with Lady Foxrock," and she half rose and stretched out an appealing arm.

"No, dearest; if there is going to be trouble, I will stand by you. As to wondering who I am, Leonora," now facing the lady, "why should I, when I know that I am Rata Loftus?"

"By all accounts, you have cherished a delusion. You are no more to Mrs. Loftus than to me—you are an adopted child. Mrs. Loftus adopted you, when you were two years old."

"Well, even so, she *is* my mother," coming over and taking her hand. "I could not love her more if she were ten times my mother." And she raised her eyes defiantly to Lady Foxrock.

"Yes—yes," faltered the miserable Mrs. Loftus. "Yes, darling; you are not my *real* child. I hoped you would never, never know—and now!"—looking at Lady Foxrock—"is not *that* enough? Rata has always been to Edgar and me as our very, very own."

"Enough!" echoed the visitor, "no, not nearly enough—not half enough. The girl should be made acquainted with her own race. Do you think I will stand by in silence and allow my only brother, the future head of the family, to marry a *Maori*?"

"A Maori! What nonsense!" cried Rata indignantly.

"Nevertheless, your own grandfather is still living," she continued inexorably. "He is a chief called Ramparaha, and resides in a 'Pa'—"

"There! you have killed her!" screamed the girl, rushing forward and catching Mrs. Loftus in her arms. Mrs. Loftus, whose blanched face had, during the above conversation, assumed a death-like hue, and who now collapsed without a word into a heap upon the sofa.

It was a dead faint indeed. Having laid her down and unfastened the neck of her dress, Rata dashed to the bell.

Then as she returned to the invalid she said, "I think you had better go—you have done your worst."

"I have done my *best* for my brother," answered Lady Foxrock fiercely. "I am sorry your patroness has fainted—she would have kept the secret always, to her very last hour; what I have stated is true—and can be proved."

"Mother—mother," murmured the girl, as she rubbed the cold hands. Then to a servant, "Run for the nearest doctor, and send some brandy. Mrs. Loftus is very ill; and let someone show this lady out."

Lady Foxrock's words were prophetic, for Mrs. Loftus had kept her secret to her dying hour. When the doctor and the brandy arrived, she was past all human aid.

It appeared that she had a most dangerous form of heart disease, and it was a marvel she had survived for so long.

Rata was stunned—she had sustained two violent shocks within the same hour: the announcement of her parentage, and the loss of her mother.

Her grief was at first as wild and uncontrollable as that of one of her savage ancestors; then she became as a creature of stone, and shut herself up from all

eyes, like some wounded animal, who would suffer alone. Lady Nesfield and Lumley were all sympathy and affection—they did not yet know the truth. Lord Nesfield undertook the funeral arrangements and Lady Nesfield—who could not prevail on Rata to leave the house—offered to take up her quarters in Lowndes Square; but this Rata declined. She and her sorrow, her anguish, and her fears were sufficient company for one another. The day after the funeral, a paragraph to this effect appeared among the fashionable intelligence :

“Owing to the sudden death of Mrs. Loftus, the marriage of Miss Loftus and Captain the Hon. Lumley Grantham, fixed for the 13th inst., is unavoidably postponed.”

When affairs were returning to their normal course, Lady Foxrock made her parents and her brother acquainted with the result of her investigations into the past of their future relation. At first their amazement transcended expression. The intelligence fell like a moral avalanche; they were all three stunned by the information.

“A Maori!” they repeated; “a Maori—a *Maori*!”

“But she is so accomplished and graceful, and sings so splendidly,” argued Lady Nesfield.

“I believe many Maori women are graceful, and have fine voices.”

“And so *fair*,” objected his lordship.

“Her father was an Englishman.”

“And she never knew this till the other day. Oh, poor child!”

“The discovery you made killed the old lady,” added Lord Nesfield.

“It certainly hastened her end,” she admitted; “but, according to the doctors, she *ought* to have died years ago; in fact, it was a miracle she lived so long!”

"It is an extraordinary affair," exclaimed her father, "a most terrible disclosure—it seems incredible; and that such a—I may say—unheard-of catastrophe should occur in *our* family——"

His family, his pedigree, was Lord Nesfield's pride; a long descent stirred his enthusiasm; before all things in the world he respected blue blood. His ancestors had fought at Cressy and Poitiers—he claimed descent from Henry the Seventh; that his only son and heir should marry a Maori woman—the descendant of cannibals and savages! Never. He was sorry for Lumley and the girl, but his resolution was embodied in the word *never*.

When Rata permitted Lady Nesfield to see her, she realised by instinct that she was acquainted with her story, although not a word was uttered. And Lumley—he knew also. He called to see her daily, and sent her flowers and notes, but she still remained mute and invisible.

At last she reappeared and granted him an audience in the drawing-room. But here was a Rata he had never seen before, dressed in trailing black, and looking worn, hollow-eyed, and aged.

He felt as if this girl were a stranger.

"No, no; don't kiss me, Lumley," she protested. "Sit down in that chair, and let me talk to you. In the first place, I wish to show you a letter. In my—in—Mrs. Loftus's despatch-box I found this addressed to me, and inscribed, 'To be opened after my death.' It will tell you everything you ought to know."

He glanced at the letter in his hand. It began :

"DEAREST RATA,

"When your eyes read these words I shall be no more, and I am now about to tell you what I never imparted to you in life. You are not my own child, but my

adopted daughter. Your parentage will startle you, my dear ; you were born in a Maori 'Pa' near Wellington. I saw you there, a lovely, fair baby of two years old, fell in love with you, and, after a little time persuaded your grandfather, Ramparaha, chief of a great tribe, to give you to me, to bring up absolutely as my own. You were an orphan, and he had other grandchildren. Your father was an Englishman of good birth—needless to tell you his name. Your mother was the most beautiful girl of her race in the whole of the North Island. They were married by a priest, and by the rites of her tribe. Not long afterwards he was drowned in the lake Tavatara ; your mother died in giving you birth, and that is your history. We never regretted the step we took—you were always our joy and comfort. We moved away from the neighbourhood of Wellington, and brought you up as an English girl ; you have not one Maori trait in your character. I feel that my life hangs by a thread, and I intend to take you to Europe, where I hope you may make friends, and possibly marry. Once you have won the love of a good man, who will be your protector and guardian, I am ready to depart in peace. He will have to be told the truth some day, when you are his wife, and, if he loves you, it can make no difference.

" My will, enclosed with this letter, was drawn up in New Zealand, and is perfectly legal, and formal. In it I speak of you as Rata, my adopted daughter, and leave you all I possess. Make good use of this wealth, dear child, and be happy."

When Lumley Grantham came to the end of this letter he looked up, and met the eyes of his *fiancé*, and for some seconds they surveyed one another in silence. She was the first to speak.

" It makes a difference—a terrible difference, Lumley, does it not ? "

" But *you* are not changed."

" I am—I am a Maori. Imagine it ! A Maori ! I seem to feel different—to summon up strange, dim

dreams. A tall old man with feathers on his head—yes—of a low, dark hut with smoke—”

“No—no,” protested Lumley, “that is your imagination. Your nerves have gone to pieces.”

“And I would always be thinking of *that*.”

The man felt curiously embarrassed—the girl was so matter-of-fact, so unlike herself; there was something unfamiliar, and almost stern about her.

“Your father is, of course, overwhelmed by the news,” she resumed. “I remember he asked to see the Loftus’s pedigree—think of my pedigree! Tell me, what does he say? Oh, speak to me *plainly*—he will not have me as a daughter-in-law?”

“He likes you personally, Rata, so does my mother; you know that, but—but—”

“Yes, it is a tremendous but—an impassable but—I understand.”

“Of course it will never be known beyond ourselves.”

“It will,” she interrupted. “My mother hugged herself with the same delusion—yet the secret crept out—and killed her!”

“It shall not kill us,” he answered slowly. “We will, on the contrary, smother and bury it.”

“Ah, easier said than done! Now tell me frankly, Lumley, what are your family proposing to do with me?”

“To find you a nice lady companion, and let you travel for a bit.”

“Yes—and then?”

“Well, I—” he stammered, “I’m not sure that they suggested anything further. To be honest, my father will not hear of our marriage. My mother is heartbroken; but she, too, is against it. Leonora—is—is—”

“Triumphant! That is understood. And you, Lumley?”

"I am ready to marry you to-morrow. I love you, Rata. Of course you come first of all; but I do not wish to quarrel with my father, or break my mother's heart. It seems so hard to hit on the right thing, and decide. I want a good think—all by myself. I will go off alone to-morrow morning into the country, and come back and tell you what the result is, and then we can make our plans."

"Very well."

"What time shall I come—may I say four o'clock?"

"Yes."

"Then four o'clock to-morrow without fail."

Rata awaited the appointed hour—which meant so much to her—with feverish impatience; long before the time she was pacing the drawing-room and watching the timepiece. Did Lumley mean to abandon her? Was the suggestion of travelling on the Continent but the preliminary to a final farewell? Had he not been confused, embarrassed, unlike himself, and cold, when they had met the previous day, although his sympathy for her loss had seemed truly real and sincere? With these thoughts forming and glowing in her brain she worked herself into a condition of the highest mental tension. Four o'clock—half-past five—and no Lumley; he who was so true to his word, and so punctual! What did it mean? It meant, that he had decided against her, and dared not venture to announce the fact face to face.

After this came the agonies of waiting for the postman's knock. No letter, not a line from him. All that night she lay wide awake, thinking for herself, and enduring a mental torture such as she had never dreamt of—it was ten times worse than mere physical pain. So Lumley was lost to her—as well as her mother. She had not a relation in Europe, and was practically alone in the world.

The following day came and passed with leaden feet. It brought piles of cards of condolence and inquiries. There were letters from dressmakers, milliners, and shops, papers, circulars, notes from acquaintances, legal looking documents—not a sign from Lumley. Oh, it was too cruel of him to torture her like this! About five o'clock, she relinquished all hope and made up her mind to act for herself.

Lumley Grantham had taken his bicycle by rail down to Croydon, and started for a long, solitary spin. He always enjoyed his own society, and could not exist without plenty of exercise, and, as he skimmed along the country roads, his brain was hard at work, sorting out the *pros* and *cons* of an extremely difficult situation. He was resolved to marry Rata—to that point his mind was anchored—but in deference to his father's sensibilities he felt that he was bound to do nothing suddenly. He and Rata must wait; time would soften the sharp edge of the shock that his parents had sustained. Rata could travel; she had never seen the Continent. He would run out to South Africa for a few months—and possibly by Christmas . . . . Here his bicycle ran over a loose stone—he lost his balance and fell heavily on his head. An hour later, he was found by a farmer's carter, taken to the farm, and there laid, still insensible, under the shade of the best four-poster. A doctor was summoned, and announced slight concussion of the brain, and rest essential; but it was two days before the traveller was fit to return to Lóndon. His mother—accustomed to his erratic departures—was only slightly concerned—and hailed his reappearance with relief.

Two days after his appointment, he arrived to keep it, but found, to his surprise, that Miss Loftus was not at home, and the household seemed a little upset.

Miss Loftus had departed that morning in a four-wheeler, taking a small box and a bag with her, and leaving her maid without any instructions. She had not mentioned when she proposed to return.

And as it turned out, Miss Loftus never did return. She had walked out of the house, and abandoned her belongings, all her jewellery, including engagement ring, letters, papers, personal possessions, and the will of the late Mrs. Loftus.

Presently the family lawyers arrived, and dismissed the servants, gave up the house, and set about tracing the heiress. But she seemed to have vanished, as it were, into the air. Lord Nesfield was agreeably and obviously relieved, until he was assured by his son that, unless the lost lady was found, he would never marry, and this statement considerably modified his joy, for Lord Nesfield disliked his next heirs, the Nesfields of Barlow, even more intensely than the idea of a daughter-in-law with *strange* blood in her veins!

Lumley Grantham, after fruitless visits, first to Gloucestershire, and then Lahore, finally set out for New Zealand, "the wonderland of the world," with its mountains, glaciers, waterfalls, and lakes. Here it took some time tracing a lady who, three months previously, had landed at Dunedin; but he tracked her steps patiently, and at last discovered that she had disappeared among a Maori tribe near Kaiapui in the lake country. Here he sought the great "Pa" of the chief Ramparaha, and found him, the splendid wreck of a fine Maori warrior, wrapped in a cloak of feathers, his head adorned with the plumes of authority, enjoying a long pipe in the door of his abode. Around were various Maori women, young and old, with thick, grizzly black hair and tall, graceful figures, dressed, as is the present custom, in skirts and blouses, instead of their picturesque native costumes. A few fine, stalwart men were loitering about, smoking and talking.

Over them all lay the spell of unconquerable indolence—children, dogs, and flies were the only objects endowed with vitality.

In reply to Captain Grantham's question, the chief replied, "Yes, one white woman come here two moons ago—my daughter's daughter, she said—but she was all English. Her mother was Tassila the beautiful, who died young. I gave her baby to a lady from Wellington. Twenty years after the baby comes back to the tribe; but she is a stranger."

"Yes, of course she is," assented his visitor, with emphasis.

"She liked not our food, nor our ways, although we held a Tangi in her honour and gave *poi deones* and *hakas*. She would not even *look*—also she knew not our tongue. She sat all day alone in her hut and wept, and ate nought, and grew thin, oh, so thin—and then she—as was best—left us."

"Where is she?" enquired Captain Grantham eagerly; "you know?"

"Oh yes," gravely nodding his plumed head, "I know."

"And will you take me—will you show me?"

"Why do you seek her?"

"Because she and I were to have been married, and I have come to fetch her back to England."

"Ah!" rising stiffly, "and so you were to marry my granddaughter Rata. Then follow me, and I will show you where she is."

And Ramparaha, the lineal descendant of the great Tuahariri, led the way through the surrounding *raupo*, or scrub, up a very steep hill, from the summit of which was a view of considerable extent.

"You see that big lake?" he said, pointing his shrivelled hand towards a melancholy sheet of distant water, in which the mountains were darkly reflected. "She is always staring at the water—some day it will

take her. Her heart is not here—but in her father's country."

As Ramparaha spoke, they reached a solitary wattled hut, and in reply to a call, the ghost of Rata appeared in the doorway. She was incredibly changed—robbed of every trace of beauty, worn and emaciated—and wore a Maori skirt, and jacket, her masses of hair hanging down her back. At first, she looked dazed, and startled; then her black eyes took a fierce expression, as she surveyed her grandfather's companion in expressive silence.

"I have come to fetch you, Rata," he said.

"The last time—you never came—you—*deserted* me," she answered hoarsely.

"Rata, I could not help it—I met with an accident and was unconscious for days. When I recovered you were gone—and I have searched the world for you! Will you believe me, and come home?"

Ten minutes later, the befeathered old chief gave an audible grunt of satisfaction and relief, as he beheld his granddaughter and the Englishman walk down the hill together hand in hand.

### III

#### THE NORTH VERANDAH

A CHANCE meeting in the hall of a Swiss hotel, in the vicinity of the visitors' book, a polite "After you," and a similarity of surnames led to our acquaintance with two charming Americans. The acquaintance ripened into friendship, and ultimately my sister Lucy and self discovered that Mrs. Washington-Dormer and her son Philip were connected with our family, and that we, the Dormers of Ashley Gardens, Vic-

toria, London, S.W., were cousins (several times removed) of our namesakes of Rochelle, near Lexington, Kentucky, U.S.A.

Mrs. Dormer was a widow with a good figure, snow-white hair, and a bright, intelligent face. She had also a cheerful manner, and an air of suppressed energy. Having confessed to the national passion for old places, old curiosities and old pedigrees, she set to work to examine our family tree, from which it appeared that a certain relative had emigrated in the year 1810, settled, married and founded a dynasty in that State, so worthily celebrated for its thoroughbred horses and blue grass.

In company of "Cousin" Carolina and "Cousin" Philip, we travelled through Northern Italy and the Tyrol with mutual enjoyment, and before we separated in Paris had entered into a solemn league and covenant to visit our Kentucky cousins in the early "fall." I was rather astonished at the alacrity with which Lucy accepted this invitation—knowing that she was a hopelessly bad sailor and how she hated the sea! It, however, dawned on me that she liked Cousin Philip, and the least observant could see that he worshipped her.

Behold us therefore arrived and happily established at Rochelle, a stately old "colonial" house which, with its pillared verandahs on all four sides, presented a dignified appearance in the midst of spreading turf lawns (the beautiful blue grass), avenues of walnut trees, and clumps of oak and hickory.

In former days, Rochelle had been surrounded by an immense estate, worked by slaves who raised and gathered vast crops of hemp, tobacco, and corn; but now the shrunken acreage was chiefly devoted to the breeding and rearing of horses; for these Cousin Philip enjoyed a reputation that extended from New York to New Orleans. My sister Lucy was in her

element, being a fearless rider and a capital whip; Cousin Carolina, too, was an admirable horsewoman, despite her fifty years. The days were spent in driving racing trotters, galloping young thoroughbreds, visiting distant runs, and inspecting rival stables. These joys were not for *me!* I am naturally timid, a shameless coward where horses are concerned, distrustful of distant cows, and all strange dogs. I believe mine is what is termed "the artistic temperament" (I paint and write poetry), yet I have a certain queer courage of my own. For instance, I am not afraid to discharge a servant, to venture alone into a dark room, and have no belief in ghosts. When my sister, cousins, and their friends scoured the neighbourhood, I remained contentedly at Rochelle, sketching the best "bits" of scenery, the little black "piccaninnys," and the interior of the house itself. Mr. and Mrs. Gossett, Cousin Carolina's niece and nephew, were a gay young couple also of the party, which included Cousin Carolina's old schoolfellow, Miss Virginia Boone, a lineal descendant of the founder of the State. She was an interesting woman, and had a fund of stories relating to Kentucky and the Civil War, which rent the State in two. One day Lucy asked her to tell us something about Rochelle itself; it was so mellowed and solid, and in its way delightful, with an atmosphere of age and peace. Surely it had a history?

"Well, you see," said Miss Boone, clearing her throat, "Carolina has not lived here long—it's not *her* family place. It belonged to the Taylors a great while back, and it was standing empty for quite a spell. The grass is said to be the best in the world for young horses, and Philip was crazy to come here, so he routed his mother out at last; Rochelle was a dead bargain too, and though Carolina was loath to move, now she likes it." Then, as if to herself, she added,

"She comes from a distance—or maybe she'd never have come at all!"

This was a dark saying, and I hastened to beg for some enlightenment.

Miss Boone seemed to hesitate before she answered rather vaguely, "Well, of course, all great plantations are the same."

"The same?" I echoed.

"Yes, where numbers of slaves have been employed. See," pointing to a row of lines or negro quarters to the north of the house. "I expect in Taylor's time there were hundreds there. The estates were some of the largest in Kentucky."

"Cousin Carolina still has black servants," I remarked.

"Oh yes—Uncle Pete, Mammy, and Jane were born in the family, the children of children, of slaves, yet devoted to the Dormers."

"Do you know, I saw such a forbidding looking nigger staring in through the breakfast-room window?" said Lucy. "I've never noticed him as one of the servants or hands, and he looked anything but devoted! He was coal black and big, and he pressed his hideous face close up against the glass door and scowled at me and muttered something; when I got up, and went to find out what he wanted, he was gone."

"A tramp," I suggested.

"Possibly. I hope I shan't see him again!" said Lucy, rising. "Here come the horses and the buggy; you," to me, "will have the house to yourself for the whole afternoon."

"So much the better," I answered; "I intend to make a sketch of Taffy, and there will be no one to distract his attention."

Taffy was a handsome fox-terrier, remarkable for a very short tail and great independence of character.

I watched the cavalcade turn down the avenue,

Cousin Carolina and Miss Boone driving, followed by two mounted couples, and then set to work to persuade Taffy to sit for his portrait. By and by the fierce glare of the setting sun compelled me to retreat with my block, paint-box, and model into the north verandah. This overlooked from a respectful distance the servants' quarters—and, possibly for this reason, was but little frequented. It proved delightfully shady and almost empty, save for a few roomy old cane chairs, but now that I had obtained a satisfactory light my sitter began to fail me; he became restless, fidgety and disobedient, turning his head, pricking up his ears; finally he trotted off bodily. His attitude implied grave suspicion of something, or somebody—and his air was so uneasy that he almost gave the impression of there being an intruder in our vicinity—visible only to him!

This of course was a ridiculous idea, but as nothing would induce Taffy to "sit," I relinquished the hope of finishing my sketch, and fetching a book from the drawing-room, settled myself comfortably in one of the cane chairs and prepared to pass an hour of undisturbed enjoyment. The story of "Uncle Tom" proved to be absorbing; I had almost lost consciousness of my surroundings, when I was startled by a very peculiar sound quite close to me, a strange inarticulate gurgling noise, as if someone was being choked. I looked about; there was not a soul in the verandah, and I came to the conclusion that Taffy had swallowed a fly, which had gone the wrong way. I called to him; he was not fly-catching, but seemed to be staring intently at a certain closed door, and entirely unconscious of my presence.

I resumed my book, only to be again disturbed by this peculiar choking noise, and Taffy, with all his hair bristling on his back, now sought refuge under my chair, uttering low growls. At the same moment

I noticed, coming directly from the servants' lines, a gigantic negro, whom I never remembered to have seen before. His head was bare, his face lowering and sullen; he wore a ragged blue and white striped jacket, trousers turned up to his knees, and a pair of clumsy boots. As he advanced, with a deliberate, purposeful air, I became conscious of a sensation of fear, which increased with every stride.

The evening was still and warm, not a breath of air was stirring, the very leaves were motionless. Taffy was dumb, and the only sound to be heard was these doggedly approaching footsteps.

A door in the verandah was suddenly flung open and, to my amazement, there came forth a middle-aged lady, who was a complete stranger; she wore a flowing white dressing-gown, with wide sleeves; her reddish hair, of which she had a quantity, hung loosely to her waist, her figure was tall and slight, her sallow face—this I only saw in profile—looked hard as flint; the expression of her sharply-cut features was fiercely determined, and aggressive. She hurried across the verandah with light, pattering footsteps, and reached the railings that enclosed it, almost at the same moment as the huge black. I gathered that she addressed him angrily—her face expressed violent fury—but I could not distinguish a single word. I sat there motionless, an amazed and nervous spectator. Presently Taffy crawled out from under my chair, and with one piercing howl fled from the scene like a creature possessed.

I observed that the negro listened to his mistress with downcast eyes, and an air of stolid indifference, also that, as he waited, he held one hand against his back; grasped in that hand—invisible to the woman—was a shining blade about two feet long, which I recognised as the knife used for cane-cutting, and called a “machite.”

As the two figures stood, one on the verandah, the other immediately beneath, I became aware that an enormous crowd had assembled outside the quarters, hundreds of coloured people—and a sudden hoarse hum arose, resembling the buzzing of angry bees. Finally the lady raised her clenched fist with a fierce, threatening gesture, and turned away.

As she did so, the negro gave a deep guttural laugh, reached out his arm, caught her violently by the hair, and dragged her head backwards over the edge of the railing. I saw her long thin throat, fully exposed, and it was with a shock of unexampled horror that I beheld the descent of a gleaming blade. With one swift stroke the wretched woman's head was severed from her body, and I heard the previous gurgling and choking sound, as it fell with a heavy thud upon the lawn, while the trunk collapsed in a hideous heap upon the boards of the verandah—which were instantly deluged with blood. The dreadful tide was flowing towards me, but I was unable to stir hand or foot—I felt as if I were paralysed.

As the murderer, stooping, lifted the head by its hair, I had a view of the blanched and ghastly face, and the wide-open eyes fixed in wild astonishment. He held it up towards the lines, and in response there rose strange, fierce, and prolonged yells of jubilation—such, I imagine, as are uttered by savages, when exulting over some fallen enemy. Then with his horrible trophy in one hand and a dripping knife in the other, the negro turned, and looked straight at *me*. Instantly everything became blurred, black darkness descended, and I remember no more!

When I came to myself, the clear imperative voice of Cousin Carolina was saying :

“ My dear Marion, do you know that it is very imprudent to sleep out of doors at sundown—even in our exquisite climate? ”

"Sleep!" I repeated, with an involuntary shudder; "I've not been sleeping," and with a painful effort I rose and tottered into a lighted sitting-room.

"What has happened to you, Marion?" cried my sister; "you look simply awful. Are you ill?—or have you seen a ghost?"

"Yes," I answered, looking round at six expectant faces, "I have seen *two* in the verandah!"

I noticed that Miss Boone gave me a quick, sharp look, but the rest of the company wore indulgent smiles, and Cousin Carolina said:

"No such thing as ghosts, my dear—it's only ignorant people like the negroes that believe in them now. You have Scotch blood in your veins, your mother was a Highlander, and no doubt you are a bit superstitious, and you have such imagination, dearest child, and are so highly strung. You have just dozed off and had a nightmare."

"Tell me, what do you *think* you saw?" enquired Philip, who had brought me a glass of wine.

I sipped this before I answered:

"A horrible sight, a lady in a white gown—I believe the owner of the estate—was beheaded in the verandah by a huge negro, and all the slaves—hundreds of them—shouted, and yelled for joy."

Mrs. Gossett, who was young and giddy, began to giggle, and then apologised, adding:

"It sounds so screamingly funny—a public execution in the Rochelle verandah!"

"It was just a bad nightmare, the combined result of crab salad at lunch, and 'Uncle Tom's Cabin,'" declared Cousin Carolina, "and nothing else. I believe there is a place—somewhere near Lexington—that *has* a story, but it is certainly not Rochelle, and sensible folk don't believe in such tales."

"No," I answered, now fortified by company and port wine. "But you will admit that seeing is believ-

ing. I've heard that my mother had second sight, and I'm afraid she has bequeathed it to *me*."

"My dear, you are a little upset," said Cousin Carolina; "don't think of your dream, and you will soon forget it. I daresay it was very vivid. I implore you not to repeat it to any of the servants, or we shall have the place in an uproar. Now just go and lie down, and get a rest before supper-time; Lucy will look after you. Another time, we won't leave you to keep house all alone."

Cousin Carolina was a despotic lady in her way, and would never suffer my nightmare in the back north verandah to be discussed. I still stuck to my opinion, but was as one to six—for even my own sister had deserted me and preached about imagination, and crab salad. It seemed impossible that a mere nightmare could ever be so vivid in its horror, and its realism. For several days I felt ill and nervous, and it was only my pride, Cousin Carolina's forcible character, and Mrs. Gossett's wild giggle, that restrained me from removing myself to an hotel at Lexington.

I never sat alone, and preferred a crowd to solitude. I even thrust my company on Phil and Lucy, now an engaged couple. Taffy and I were fast friends; we two had shared a unique experience—an experience apart. I was sensible of this bond in his manner, and I read it in the expression of his wistful and expressive eye.

A suspicion, nay, a conviction, took root in my mind. Miss Boone knew more about Rochelle than she pretended. More than once, I found her gazing at me, with an air of peculiar interest, and, more than once, curiosity had urged her to angle (very cautiously) for some particulars of the tragedy I thought I had seen; but I declined to indulge her. She was an unbeliever—and I held my tongue.

In the month of January, Lucy once more faced the Atlantic, accompanied by Miss Boone, Philip, and myself. She was obliged to arrange about her trousseau, and money affairs. We travelled by a big liner, and had on the whole a capital trip. Miss Boone found several friends among the passengers, and one afternoon as we sat in the library in the idle hour which follows tea, an old lady, her son and daughter joined our small circle. We discussed a variety of topics and impressions, and at last came to Kentucky State, Lexington, and Rochelle.

"Rochelle," repeated the lady's daughter. "Is not that the haunted house, Momma?"

"Yes, the Taylors' place," she answered briskly; "there is a dreadful story about it, but I fancy it is more or less forgotten by this time. For years and years it could not be let—the house, I mean; the land of course is most valuable."

"What is the story?" I enquired, and I glanced with some significance at Lucy and Philip.

"I remember hearing of it from my mother," continued the old lady, "and it's gospel truth. The Taylors were wealthy, and had a great estate, and hundreds of slaves, and were well thought of by all, till the time of Mrs. Herman Taylor, a widow, who inherited it from her husband. She was very strange—some said crazy—and lived alone; hoarded her money, flogged her slaves, and worked them to death. There were stories of terrible scenes at Rochelle—that lovely old place, so dignified and admired, had become a sort of negroes' hell! People could only talk—they did not dare to interfere. Marcella Taylor was a rich woman, and a vindictive enemy, and had overseers as cruel and hard as herself, and she got more out of her slaves in the way of return than any mistress or master in the State. When it was moonlight, it

was said, she worked them all night, and her crops were extraordinary.

At last the situation became intolerable ; beyond the endurance of flesh and blood. A field hand who had been cruelly flogged took the law into his own hands, and one evening, in the sight of the entire community, executed Mrs. Taylor in her own verandah ! He had been summoned to receive a punishment, and the story is, that he suddenly drew a long knife, which he had concealed, dragged her backwards by the hair, and beheaded her on the spot. He took the head with him, escaped to the woods, and was never seen or heard of again.

" It was also said that every anniversary the scene was re-enacted in the same verandah—but fortunately was only visible to some. The Villiers, who succeeded to the estates, hated the place, and got rid of it, and so for two generations the house has had a bad name, but now it is apparently recovering its character. I suppose the supernatural has a time-limit ? "

She glanced at me interrogatively, but Miss Boone threw me an imploring look and I suffered silence to pass for assent. In this extraordinary and unexpected fashion my experience was confirmed, my truthfulness vindicated, there was an end to gibes about dreams, and crab salad. Subsequently Miss Boone confessed to me that the tale of the north verandah was not new to her, but that she had not wished to frighten Cousin Carolina. As if anything could frighten Cousin Carolina ! She has nerves of cast-iron.

As for Lucy, she assured me with a rather unsteady laugh that when, as Mrs. Philip Dormer, she returned to Rochelle, nothing that could be offered would ever induce her to spend an afternoon there *alone*.

## IV IMITATION PEARLS

IT was entirely owing to the death and defalcations of a trustee that my sister Linda and I—heiresses in a small way—awoke one morning to find ourselves penniless! We were orphans, and since our school-days had made our home with a widowed aunt in the depth of the country, on the borders of an ancient village, within a parish whose extent was under a hundred acres. Aunt Sophy's house, which enjoyed the flattering name of "Heart's Delight," was a little old manor, with shallow oak stairs, low ceilings and heavy beams, standing in the midst of rich meadows and stately trees, and immediately surrounded by a delicious garden, with mulberry trees, and a stew-pond.

Here we three lived in complete harmony. Aunt Sophy was fifty-four, my sister Linda, temporary housekeeper and manager, was twenty-four—she was engaged to Arthur Fortescue, a naval officer on the China station—whilst I was but twenty, rather pretty, incorrigibly cheerful, and entirely fancy free.

Mr. Benford, our guardian, who had been father's best man—and was presumed to be our best friend—was a bland, somewhat portly, elderly gentleman, who, when we made rare visits to London, took us to the theatre, and to dine at smart restaurants, and even lent us his beautiful blue Panhard! He occupied luxurious bachelor quarters in the West End, and was generally supposed to be enviably rich. Recently he died rather suddenly—indeed, suicide had been suspected—and when his affairs came to be examined, three tragic facts were disclosed. For years, he had been involved in serious difficulties; his debts were

enormous, and our twelve thousand pounds had long been dispersed in wild speculations—though he had paid us the interest punctually twice a year—and now both our guardian and our income had ceased to exist.

At first we felt stunned; and for many days Aunt Sophy remained sternly incredulous. Ultimately the truth was brought home to her by friends. Letters and visits of sympathy, offers of advice and help were not lacking. Linda, who was really the head of the house, promptly decided that one or both of us must turn out and work for our living, for Aunt Sophy's means were limited (barely two hundred a year, besides "Heart's Delight" and its contents).

The first and most essential move was to cut down expenses; the victoria and dog-cart, the sleek horse, and sleeker cows, were sold, maids and gardener dismissed, and the establishment reduced to a mere general and boy. The old pony remained to take aunt out in the governess-car, but the meadows were let, and the family silver disposed of, as well as two much-prized Chippendale chairs.

Arthur Fortescue's uncle, a wealthy admiral on the retired list (who invariably spoke of himself as a "sea-dog"), would not consent to Linda taking any situation—indeed, he was furious at the mere suggestion—but offered no alternative. However, a girl so capable and contriving was in the right place at home; she proposed a daring scheme—to make the garden *pay*, and also to undertake delicate needlework for one of the great outfitting shops in London.

Summer wore into autumn, yet still I, so to speak, "remained on hand." I gardened, and sewed industriously, and did housework, hoping every day that Aunt Sophy's anxious wish might be fulfilled, and that "something nice would turn up for Letty." A post as companion to an amiable and wealthy old lady; or as governess to two dear little girls under

ten, was what my friends desired. I spoke French fluently, and was a good pianist, but as so much more is expected in these days (Latin, German, Euclid, Mathematics, Gymnastics, Sketching), the value of my services was placed at the low figure of forty pounds per annum and washing; and yet in spite of this moderate assessment, no eager employer had claimed me!

The truth was, we were out of the beaten track—and Early Victorian in our ideas. Aunt Sophy had a horror of “seeing me in an advertisement,” as she expressed it. “It was always so much pleasanter and safer to try and hear of a nice opening through one’s friends.”

And to do them justice, our friends were active—especially Miss Pinfold—an old maid who lived at the other end of the village; Mrs. Clarke, our rector’s wife, was also zealous on my behalf. Miss Pinfold wrote many letters, also scores of postcards, and almost every acquaintance had been victimised and pestered, irrespective of age or sex. More than once she said to Aunt Sophy :

“If Letty could only go to *India*! I’ll lay my life a girl with her remarkable looks will marry some wonderful catch.”

But Aunt Sophy was not in favour of this dazzling idea and looked coldly on the scheme. India was too far away, and was said to be the happy hunting-ground of fast women—as well as abounding with snakes!

For my own part, I had always (privately) cherished a burning desire to see the East, and though I did not believe in the wonderful, or any, “catch,” I was profoundly interested in Miss Pinfold’s tales of the days of her grandfather, who had been a famous Indian warrior, and had fought the Sikhs, and also in the more modern activities of her two married nieces.

In the end, it was Mrs. Clarke who brought us the great news! She arrived one evening at tea-time, eager and important, letter in hand, and breathlessly announced that she had found "the very thing for Letty at last!" Her husband's cousin, who received Indian children, and had "an Indian connection," knew of a lady, the wife of an official in good position, who required a governess to take charge of two dear little girls, aged seven and eight; they were in the hills almost all the year in a perfect climate; the salary offered was forty pounds and a second-class passage out, and, if suitable, an engagement for two years. The governess must be a gentlewoman, young, healthy, energetic, and Church of England. She would be required to teach French, English, and music, and expected to arrive not later than the end of February. It was now November.

"It seems made for Letty!" said Mrs. Clarke—her voice quivering with triumph as she handed the epistle to my aunt; "you should write *at once!*"

But Aunt Sophy and Linda were politely dubious.

"Dear Mrs. Clarke, who *is* this Mrs. Hooper?" enquired my sister. "Letty could not write and engage herself to a lady we know nothing about; of course, there must be mutual references; and forty pounds for India is *so* little!"

"Well, she gets her board and washing free," put in Miss Pinfold, who happened to be present, "and has the forty pounds in her pocket, and, as I've said before, Letty will never come home Letty Harlowe—she'll make a great match!" and she rubbed her knees with an air of complacent finality.

"Not likely," objected Linda; "and Letty is not going to India on the chance of finding a husband. Arthur says those days were over sixty years ago. Of course, I know Letty has always devoured books on India, and longs to see it; but she is not to jump at

Mrs. Hooper's offer—though it is so good of Mrs. Clarke to bring it and, I know she," looking at her, " would be the first to advise caution."

Ultimately Mrs. Hooper proved to be my fate. Her references were unexceptional. Colonel Hooper was in the Indian Army, and held an important post on "the Survey." She wrote Aunt Sophy a letter that was almost gushing, and promised to take every care of the dear girl and treat her, in short, as the daughter of the house! I may mention that my references had been forwarded, and included a warm recommendation from a lady of title.

The next weeks simply flew! My outfit was put in hand, an escort was found for me in Mrs. Russell, a distant relative, whose husband commanded a regiment in Bengal, and our passages were booked in the *Malwa*, which sailed on February 5th. Linda had insisted that I should travel first-class, and share Mrs. Russell's cabin. She had known our mother, and was sure to be kind to me. The extra passage money and my outfit made a deep hole in our finances, and Linda sold almost the whole of our jewellery in order to meet these expenses. All my ornaments now consisted of a pair of gold bangles, a watch, and a string of Parisian pearls, fastened by an old diamond clasp that had belonged to my grandmother.

I will draw a veil over those last weeks at home, my tearful farewells to the neighbours, Aunt Sophy, and the dogs. Linda and I spent our last day together in London, and the next morning she escorted me down to Tilbury in order to see me off. The *Malwa* seemed to be a full ship; there were numbers of passengers bound for Gibraltar and Egypt. In the saloon a wire was awaiting me; it was from Mrs. Russell, and said, " My boy dangerously ill, appendicitis, departure postponed, sorry." Undoubtedly I was condemned to travel alone, and must just make the best of the

situation. Linda was most dreadfully concerned. She actually broke down, and wept.

"I felt so confident, and happy at your having *one* friend in India," she sobbed. "Oh, it's really heart-breaking!"

After I had comforted her a little, we descended together in order to inspect my cabin and arrange my belongings. We found Mrs. Russell's place already occupied—evidently by a lady who used a prodigious amount of scent. She had secured the bottom berth, the best looking-glass, and her odds and ends were scattered about in a most disorderly fashion.

Afterwards, when Linda and I walked about together, she said :

"How I hate your going alone, Letty; you are so young—yes, and so pretty. How I wish there was some nice, motherly woman I could pin you on to!" and she looked around the crowd with a face of blank despair. "Do be careful who you speak to, and who you get to know; keep to yourself as much as possible, and above all avoid men."

Never had I seen Linda so depressed, so nervous or so tearful—not even when Arthur went to China—and I must confess that I, too, wept bitterly as I signalled to a figure that waved from the dock.

Going down the Channel the weather was moderate. I found my allotted place at dinner, and kept it, too. There were about twelve at our table. On my left was a florid young officer, with prominent brown eyes and turned-up moustache, who talked to me persistently; but after that evening I spent two miserable days in my berth. My cabin companion proved to be a stout, showy lady, with auburn hair, expressive dark eyes, and an exquisite complexion. She seemed to fill the whole cabin, and to be under the impression that she was its sole occupant.

At an early hour the stewardess brought her a stiff

whisky and soda, afterwards, she smoked cigarettes, breakfasted on grilled duck and porter, and then made a leisurely and elaborate toilette—sitting before the glass on a rickety camp stool doing up her face with various little brushes and pencils, serenely indifferent to my interested inspection. Her hair, which seemed coarse and rather scanty, was supplemented by a generous supply of curls and rolls; her petticoats were the most elaborate I ever beheld, and her dress, blouse, and furs looked equally expensive. She wore enormous diamond earrings, a jaunty, rather *outré* hat, and eventually sallied forth in obvious good humour with her own appearance.

All the afternoon she sprawled in her berth, smoking, dozing, and drinking whiskies and soda. Subsequently she attired herself for dinner in a costume that was far more suitable to a ballroom than board ship. The lady kept late hours, snored noisily, and never vouchsafed the faintest recognition of me, until I brusquely introduced myself to her notice. I was watching her toilette on the third morning out, with almost painful intensity. I had read of the “art of making up the face,” and now I was receiving first-rate, first-hand, instruction. As the artist was about to put away her brushes I could not refrain from exclaiming :

“ You’ve forgotten the left eyebrow ! ”

“ Laws, so I ’ave ! ” she answered with astonishing composure. “ And so you are not dumb or dead, you little cherub up aloft ? My ! but you ’ave ’ad a time ! You look like a happorth of soap after a week’s washing. Take my advice and ’ave a good old whisky and soda, and *that* will buck you up.”

Although I turned a deaf ear to this suggestion, I managed to dress, and with the assistance of the stewardess crawled on deck the same afternoon. It was bitterly cold and sunless, and I realised that I was

all alone aboard this great rolling steamer, on the grey heaving sea, amidst a crowd of total strangers. No doubt I looked rather shaky and forlorn, for a nice old gentleman, with a friendly face, came forward and led me to a chair, whilst another—a younger man—placed a rug over my knees.

"I'm glad to see you are up," said the former. "Anything is better than stifling down below, eh?"

I smiled faintly as I thanked him.

"I suppose your friends are *hors de combat?*" he continued, as he sat down beside me.

"My friends—I have none on board. I am all alone," I replied. I still felt weak and giddy, and could not restrain the tears which started into my eyes.

"You must allow me to bring you some chicken broth," urged the younger gentleman, who had a clear-cut, clean-shaven face, and wore a fur-lined coat; and in another moment a steaming cup was in my hands. As I sipped the broth I felt revived, the keen sea air refreshed me, and sitting between my two new acquaintances I found myself telling them that I was going all the way to Bombay, that it was my first long journey, and how I had been disappointed of the company of my chaperone.

"I hope you have a nice cabin companion?" enquired the old man (I believe he was about fifty).

I hesitated for a moment, and then indicated my partner, who, at a little distance, lay extended in a chair bandying good stories and chaff with a hearty audience of three men. It seemed to me that my neighbours exchanged hasty glances, and instantly began to talk about some of the other passengers. Many, I gathered, were still below; we had a prince and princess and suite on board, a well-known novelist, a famous actress, but all the notable and wealthy passengers were landing at Port Said for Egypt.

"After the Canal," added my new acquaintance, "we shall be an empty ship."

At dinner time the weather was calmer, and I ventured to descend, and found myself once more beside the agreeable officer, who welcomed me with effusion. During the courses he told me the names of most of those at our table. My old gentleman was, it seemed, a General Pontifex, who was *en route* for Madras, to take up a command; his clean-shaven, good-looking companion was his nephew, a Mr. Sandars, bound for the jungle and sport. Captain Bilton (my neighbour) informed me that he was only going to Gib., but that as far as he went he would consider me his special charge, and proved as good as his word. He sat beside me on deck, and subsequently promenaded with me, and, although I assumed my most distant manner (remembering Linda's warning), became every hour more and more friendly and confidential. On the fourth evening, he suddenly remarked :

"I say, Miss Harlowe, what a ripping necklace you have! I wonder you dare to wear it on board ship."

I made no reply, and turned the subject; but when he again returned to the charge, and said as he stared fixedly at my ornament, "Do excuse my rudeness, but I must confess one does not often see such topping pearls!" I felt that I must not allow him to deceive himself, and replied :

"I am glad you admire them—but they are not real."

"Oh, nonsense!" he protested energetically, "I think I know real pearls when I see them."

"I assure you that I bought these in Regent Street for twenty-five shillings."

"What! Well, I never was more deceived in my life—such colour and shape; they look worth every penny of five thousand pounds!"

"I only wish they were," I answered unguardedly.

"Why?"

"Because I would not then be on my way to India."

"But you are going out to your people, and are just the sort of girl that will have a ripping time!"

"I am afraid you are wrong again—real pearls and ripping times are not for me! I am on my way to be a governess in Naini Tal."

For a moment he was too stupefied to speak, his eyes seemed to travel over me from my necklace, my lace blouse (remnant of better days) to my neat evening shoes, and he exclaimed :

"By Jove! You don't say so! Anyone would take you for the daughter of a millionaire."

After this evening I seemed no longer to have any special interest for Captain Bilton; he scarcely spoke to me at meals, and then in an off-hand, patronising manner, that I secretly resented; yet on deck, the night of our last conversation, he had assured me he had never in all his life been so much struck by a girl as by me, and we must not lose sight of one another. He added that he would write—and send me a fan from Gib.

How thankful I was that I had received this overture with civil discouragement, for when we touched Gibraltar, Captain Bilton had so far forgotten my existence as not even to wish me good-bye!

The Mediterranean was warmer than the Bay, and I was nearly suffocated by the perfumes in my cabin, for my companion (Madame Garda) would not suffer the ports to be opened; and really between patchouli and cigarette smoke, I felt all but asphyxiated. Two days before we reached Port Said I missed the string of pearls—my sole and paltry ornament: I remembered that I had worn it the previous night, and taken it off when I undressed; and now it was gone. I searched very carefully. No, there was not a trace

of it. I applied to Madame Garda when she swung into the cabin before tea.

"Pearls! Never knew you had such things! We must have a good look. Imitation, you say? Well, even so, you don't want to lose them, do you?" and she good-naturedly went down on her knees, and raked under the berth with an umbrella, searched all over the floor with her large bejewelled hands—and found nothing!

"It's a pity!" she exclaimed, rising breathless. "I do 'ate losing things myself. Maybe you dropped 'em on deck—them clasps are so rotten."

The next day I confided my loss to the stewardess, who came into the cabin and instituted a most business-like investigation.

"If you say you had them, and hung them on your pin-cushion night afore last, they're bound to be in this cabin, and I'm bound to find them!" she announced with an air of invincible determination. After examining all my property, she proceeded to turn out madame's belongings with reckless disrespect, violently shaking her gowns and petticoats.

"Ah! ha!" she exclaimed, as suddenly, with a clinking sound, my necklace fell out of the pocket of a gorgeous bath-gown. "I thought as much!" and she nodded at me with terrible significance; "now you lock them up, miss."

"But, stewardess, they are only imitation," I protested, "and it must have been a mistake."

"I don't hold with those sort of mistakes," she sternly declared. "Your pretty sister asked me to keep an eye on you, and so I have. To-morrow madame goes ashore, and a good riddance. Her liquor bill would frighten a barman, and after to-morrow, Miss Harlowe, you will have the cabin to yourself."

I do not know if madame discovered that her

dressing-gown had been rifled; at any rate, she made no sign, and before she landed bade me an affectionate farewell, assuring me that "I was a real good, decent little girl—and she could go round the world with me!"

The important Egyptian crowd went ashore with piles of luggage, maids, and valets, bent on a season in Cairo, or a trip to Assouan, or even Khartoum. The remnant left was comparatively a small number; officers and officials and planters going East, at the end of their leave, to brave the horrors of approaching hot weather. An Eastern moon lighted us down the Red Sea, and we had the piano and music on deck. I played most of the accompaniments, and always those for Mr. Sandars, who had a beautiful tenor voice and sang some of Wagner's songs—especially the prize song from the *Meistersinger*—delightfully. By this time I had become well acquainted with him and his uncle; indeed, they seemed like old friends, particularly the uncle, who had a knack of absorbing my confidences. I told him all about home, Linda and her *fiancé* (General Pontifex, it turned out, had been fag to the Admiral, and invariably burnt his toast and boots) and our losses. I described our neighbours, our dogs, and even Methusalem, the aged but active pony. In the mornings I played deck quoits with Mr. Sandars as partner, and in the evenings after dinner paced up and down the deck with the General, his uncle.

Besides these, I had made the acquaintance of two ladies—Mrs. Wallace and Mrs. Mason—wives of officials in Madras, who also sat at our table, and were charming to me. Oh, how I dreaded the end of the trip, when I should lose my new friends, and be once more a castaway amongst total strangers.

The evening before we landed, General Pontifex begged me to give him my address, and also not to

think it a liberty if he ventured to advise me in one matter. This, I was amazed to learn, was a request not to wear my beautiful pearls every day, and in all companies.

“India,” he declared, “is a land where jewels are more highly prized than elsewhere—and yours are magnificent, Miss Harlowe; they invite envy, and tempt thieves.”

“But they are imitation,” I replied impatiently—I was becoming tired of making this announcement. “I bought them in Regent Street two years ago. My sister thought they were too large and remarkable, but I would have them; they cost twenty-five shillings, and the clasp alone is real.”

“They look immensely valuable,” he rejoined. “Many people have noticed them—they have the real sheen. You are *sure* they are imitation?”

“Positive,” I answered; “if they were real we would have sold them with the rest of our jewellery, and the old silver and ‘chairs.’”

Mr. Sandars, who happened to be standing by, overheard this conversation. He also heard Mrs. Mason and Mrs. Wallace requesting me to write and let them know how I was getting on.

“I, too, should like to hear,” he said, “but I am going into the jungle, and don’t know my own address; but when I do emerge—I hope I may have tidings of you—somehow——”

There was something so significant in his glance that I felt my heart throb, and my face suddenly flame. I realised acutely how honestly glad I should be to have tidings of Mr. Sandars. But my prudent sister, with second-hand wisdom, had warned me against certain snares.

“Arthur says that no matter what warm friendships or desperate love affairs are started on ship-board, they *all* come to nothing! There is no one so soon for-

gotten as a fellow-passenger—he or she goes clean out of your mind along with all the voyage miseries."

To my surprise I did not part with the General and Mr. Sandars on the Apollo Bund in Bombay; we travelled in the same train (but not in the same carriage), crawling up and down the towering Ghâts, and onwards across the level, monotonous plains. They visited me from time to time with offerings of books or fruit, until early one morning we arrived at Basaule Junction, where they joined a mail for the South.

Here, after the General had said good-bye, Mr. Sandars returned unexpectedly and, holding my hand for a second, looked at me steadily. I noticed that his lips were trembling, as they said, "Little girl, don't forget me?" then he turned abruptly, and disappeared.

Early as it was, the first of March, Mrs. Hooper was already installed at "Beverley," a large, imposing house overlooking the lake at Naini Tal, and almost directly under Cheena. She received me in the drawing-room—which gave one the immediate impression of a great deal of pink. Everything seemed to be of this colour—the covers, curtains, carpet, lamp-shades. Mrs. Hooper was a woman of five-and-thirty, tall, dark, and very handsome, with an alarmingly deep voice. She accorded me—considering my long journey, and the fact that I was to be "the daughter of the house"—a surprisingly cool reception. I did not expect her to kiss me, but after my recent fatiguing experience in a hill "dandy," I should have been glad if she had asked me to take off my hat and have a cup of tea.

"Dear me, Miss Harlowe," she exclaimed, "you look much younger than I anticipated—why, you are a mere child!" she added severely.

"I was twenty-one in February," I replied.

“ You might be seventeen ! I hope I shall find you competent, healthy, and above all *steady*,” surveying me with a hard, concentrated stare.

“ I hope so,” I assented stiffly.

Then she made searching enquiries respecting the tiresome, cumbersome parcels I had brought out for her, and, when her mind had been thoroughly relieved, she raised her voice and called out “ Teesie and Dodo ! ” and two little girls, who must have been within earshot, entered demurely ; little girls with shallow faces, bright black eyes, very scanty white frocks, very thin black legs, and equally thin black pigtails—tied, needless to say, with pink ribbon.

“ These are your charges,” she explained. “ Dodo and Teesie, this is your new governess.”

The couple surveyed me in silence. Their expressions reminded me of our dog, Tack, when he had killed and buried a chicken—fearful, yet defiant !—and presently my two pupils began to mutually criticise me in voluble Hindustani, with gesticulations to correspond.

Before very long I found my level in the household. My quarters were at the back of the house—two gloomy rooms looking straight into rocks on the hill-side, and when on wet days the rain streamed down, the prospect was excessively depressing.

Here I endeavoured to teach the children, and here we had our meals. We breakfasted together, afterwards there were lessons and a promenade along the upper Mall, tiffin in the dining-room with Colonel and Mrs. Hooper—unless there was company ; then more lessons and another walk, supper, and to bed. Our outings were restricted to the wooded hillsides of two upper Malls ; from whence we caught occasional glimpses of the gleaming “ Tal ” a thousand feet beneath us ; we were never permitted to descend and mix with the gay and giddy crowd who were playing

tennis or polo, boating, shopping, or riding. I found that I was expected not only to teach the little girls, mend their clothes and be their ever-constant companion, but to wash the peevish Maltese dog, and, when there was company, was pressed into service to trim lamps, and arrange flowers.

Mrs. Hooper, a "society woman," was extremely smart, popular, and rarely at home; and Colonel Hooper, a stout, bald, good-natured man, was frequently absent for many weeks on survey. The children had been disgracefully neglected, and left entirely to the Ayah and servants (with brief interludes of governesses), and were appallingly wise for their years.

"Mamma slapped Miss Vincent," announced Teesie, "and so she left. She made a bobbery, too, and complained to the Padre. Miss Dodd would not stay either; she was always crying, and said she was a lady, and would not wash Motee, or do the dhoby—and went away in a week."

Vainly did I implore Teesie not to repeat things, but she only cracked her fingers, native fashion, and shouted at the top of her shrill voice, "Daddy says you are awfully pretty—the prettiest girl in Naini—and have a very poor time, and he and mammy had a row—and mammy said she hated the sight of you!"

It was an undeniable fact that when the Colonel was at home I was better off. He treated me with every courtesy, sent me the *Pioneer*, twice escorted me to a gymkhana with the children, and once to a theatrical performance.

By the end of July I had been five months in India and seen but little of the country, beyond the woody walks in the upper Mall at Naini Tal—now wet as sponges in the heavy monsoon—and "St. John in the Wilderness" on Sunday evenings. Mrs. Hooper attended in the morning, accompanied by the "little

girls, who sat on either side of her with roving, knowing eyes, but otherwise conducting themselves with surprising discretion. This was the only time their mother desired their society—she liked to pose (in public) as a devoted parent. I was by no means the daughter of the house, as Aunt Sophy fondly believed; in fact, I was more like a maid-of-all-work, but I kept my troubles to myself, for I knew that it would make Linda and auntie miserable if I complained, and I hoped at the end of a year to find some loophole of escape and go down to Madras, where Mrs. Mason had invited me to pay her a long, long visit in the Shevaroy Hills.

During these months I had learned Hindustani, had gained the children's entire approbation, received some startling confidences, and experienced an adventure. I was awakened one night by stealthy steps on the matting in my room, and by the light of an oil wick in a tumbler in the bath-room I beheld a tall, half-naked native busily opening boxes and drawers on my dressing table. I sat up and watched him for some minutes—somehow I was not frightened—I knew the chokedar and a peon were close by in the back verandah. He seemed to be eagerly searching for something; at last he drew it out, and it proved to be the string of pearls! These he held up to the light, felt them carefully, put them to his lips, licked them, and was about to steal away, when suddenly I gave a piercing shriek. He started violently, and dashed into the bathroom.

Meanwhile my screams had been heard, and the house was aroused. The thief endeavoured to escape through the bathroom window, but it is quite one thing to climb through a small space at your ease and leisure, and another to be compelled to do so in a desperate hurry. After a frantic struggle he wriggled through, and in doing so dropped his prize—the string

of pearls fell out of his turban—but he fled away into the woods below Cheena scot free.

When Mrs. Hooper heard of the thief's visit she was terribly alarmed, and a second watchman was immediately stationed on guard in the verandah.

"I expect he was after my diamonds," she declared, "and these Budmashes are so expert, and so cunning—they always slip off; their bodies are covered with oil."

It seemed so strange that there had been two attempts to steal a miserable little string of false pearls, and I now kept them locked up in my large steamer trunk, and rarely wore them.

They had immediately attracted Mrs. Hooper's attention, and she, like others, listened to the usual explanation, merely remarking:

"I wonder you bought them such a size! To my mind it makes an imitation look so vulgar!"

Sometimes when ladies had tiffin at Beverley the children and I were present, but on these occasions Dodo and Teesie were temporarily suppressed, and I was dumb and self-effaced.

"Mr. Sandars called to-day," remarked Mrs. Hooper to her visitor, Mrs. Leith; her tone indicated triumph. "Such a nice, good-looking young fellow! He has been shooting in the C.P. He is very well connected, and unmarried."

"What a chance for some of our spinsters!" said Mrs. Leith.

"Oh, he doesn't encourage girls—he is not a marrying man."

"Look at Miss Harlowe—isn't she funny and red!" cried Teesie, directing everyone's attention to me.

"Perhaps Miss Harlowe knows Mr. Sandars?" said Mrs. Hooper, staring at me; her voice had a sharp edge, and her eyes were piercing.

"We came out in the same ship," I explained.

"Oh, was that all?" and, turning once more to her visitor, they began to discuss a great ball that was to take place at the club, and soon forgot my existence.

That same afternoon, as I was exercising the children and the dogs in the middle Mall, I found myself suddenly confronted by Mr. Sandars. He looked uncommonly smart in his well-cut flannels, and hailed me with an air of joyous rediscovery. After a brief salutation, he said :

"So these are your charges. How are you getting on?"

"Very well, thank you."

"I must say you don't do much credit to Naini Tal air. You don't look yourself—or happy."

"You must not judge by appearances," I answered gaily. "Remember the pearls."

"Ah, yes, I remember the pearls—rather! I suppose you have them still?"

I nodded and asked, "How is General Pontifex?"

"Very fit."

"Did you have good sport?"

"Splendid. I have stacks of heads, horns, and skins at Jubbulpore waiting for me to take them home."

"You will be going soon?"

"That depends. I called to-day on Mrs. Hooper, and rather hoped to see you. I suppose you were out?"

"No, she wasn't," broke in Teesie, who had been an attentive listener, "she was giving me a music lesson. Mamma never lets the governesses see company."

"Hush, Teesie," I expostulated, and Teesie turned to her sister, and they gabbled together and held a violent argument in what was really their native

tongue. "I'm afraid we must be going home," I said. "I cannot keep these children out when the mist rises from the lake."

"May I walk back with you?" he asked.

"No, no, he may not," declared Teesie with dignified decision. "A young police officer used to come and walk with Miss Shaw, and I told mummy, and Miss Shaw was sent away directly!" and she cracked her finger joints till they sounded like so many squibs.

"And I don't wish to be sent away," I said with a smile, as I offered him my hand.

"Well, I wonder at that!" he exclaimed, "but, of course, it would be heart-breaking to part with that delightful child. *Au revoir!*" raising his cap; and as we passed down the hill, I felt unaccountably uplifted and consoled.

I noticed Mr. Sandars at evening church on Sunday, and he walked home with me, as if it were entirely a matter of course.

"I have friends who live here," he said, "the Osbornes, and they have told me all about the life you lead with the smart Mrs. Hooper—*joie de rue, douleur de maison.*"

"Oh, please don't listen to Naini Tal gossip!" I protested.

"Then please listen to me. You know this ball that comes off on Monday? My friends are going—Mrs. Osborne has met you at tiffin, and she desires me to say she will be delighted to take you."

"It is most kind of her—but Colonel Hooper—"

"Will make no objection. I've squared him—he knows my people at home, and he agrees that it is time you had some little distraction."

"I am sure Mrs. Hooper won't like it—and I know no one—"

"So much the better," he interrupted, "then you

can dance all the time with me. I suppose you have a dress?"

"Yes, and I'll wear the pearl necklace. I've not been to a dance for a year; it seems too good to be true!"

After all, it was Mrs. Hooper who chaperoned me to the dance (much against the grain), and good-natured Colonel Hooper who introduced me to partners. I spent a delightful evening, my card was filled in five minutes, and I could have danced every dance three times. I gave four waltzes to Mr. Sandars, and, for once, tasted the pleasures of a social success! In fact, I overhead whispers of, "What a pretty girl! Who is she?" and the invariable answer was, "Mrs. Hooper's governess."

But Mrs. Hooper was not pleased with her governess. Indeed the following morning she informed me that I had made myself too shockingly conspicuous, and was altogether such *bad* style; and kindly Teesie threw oil upon the flames, for a little later Mrs. Hooper, looking white and austere, came to me, and said in her most impressive manner, and in her deepest tone:

"Miss Harlowe, is it *true* that you have met Mr. Sandars in the upper Mall, and that he said you did not look happy—and asked you about the pearls?"

"He said I did not look *well*," I corrected, "and as to the pearls, that was merely an old joke."

"Bring them to me at once!" she commanded authoritatively. I brought them obediently, and placed them in her hands. "They were remarked on last night," she announced, "someone said the Vice-roy's wife had no better! Yes," turning them over as she spoke, "they *are* real," and her voice vibrated with indignation, "real; splendid, and worth thousands! How can a governess on forty pounds a year afford such? But that is easily—too easily—ex-

plained. Mr. Sandars is the explanation—he gave them to you, of course! He was your partner most of last evening—it's simply disgraceful! Now look here," breathing hard, "I give you three days' notice, a month's salary, and you get out of my house!"

Mrs. Hooper absolutely refused to listen to *any* explanation. She would not allow me to speak. Crimson in the face, and hoarse with passion, she reiterated :

"You assured me that they were imitation! I know better now! It is *you* who are the imitation—the imitation of a decent, respectable young woman. I believe your references were forged!"

Luckily the children were at a party, not listening (as usual) at the other side of the portière, and I had the whole afternoon to myself. I wrote home, and also to Mrs. Mason, and carried my letters down to the post-office, as I intended to dispatch a wire. On the hill I came face to face with Mr. Sandars.

"Hullo!" he exclaimed, as he paused and surveyed me, "so you have been crying!"

I informed him that I had just been summarily dismissed, and all because Mrs. Hooper believed that I had not come honestly by the pearls. I also proceeded to tell him how nearly they had been stolen on two occasions, although they were worthless—and that there was certainly something peculiar about them—at any rate, they had brought me bad luck.

"It is extraordinary," he assented, "and I cannot make it out! The pearls look magnificent. I noticed them last night; and yet you bought them yourself, didn't you?"

"Yes, and my sister was with me. I know the very shop in Regent Street."

"Ah well, never mind the pearls *now!*" he exclaimed with an air of almost fierce determination.

"No, and I shall certainly not wear them in my next situation," I replied.

"Your next situation?" he repeated.

"I think Mrs. Mason knows of one that will suit me."

"If it comes to that—so do I."

I stared at him in amazement. Then, with a gesture of impatience, he resumed, "Look here, I can't talk to you here among this buzzing crowd" (we were now close to the landing-stage); "come out on the lake with me for ten minutes. Never mind Mrs. Hooper or Mrs. Grundy."

When he had rowed some distance in dead silence, he suddenly rested on his oars and confronted me with a serious face.

"Miss Harlowe," he said, "I've brought you out here, where you cannot escape, to ask you to marry me. Yes, no wonder you start—but listen. Ever since I first saw you, from the moment you sat down at table opposite to me looking so timid and white, I've been in love with you. My uncle knew all about it; he, too, experienced your charm, but he urged me to go slow—you were so young and so inexperienced. He improved your acquaintance in those long boardship walks and talks, and made me furiously jealous; and as to that Bilton fellow, who started such running at first, I felt inclined to pick a quarrel and pitch him overboard. Perhaps you don't know that I am ridiculously rich; I wish I wasn't; it sounds a funny thing to say, but money is an immense responsibility, and Uncle Tom said I was bound to marry a girl who had a head on her shoulders, who could hold her own in society and be a help—and that you were a mere inexperienced child. However, he soon altered that opinion. He found you modest, accomplished, dignified and sensible. The next objection was far

more serious. He declared that you did not care a brass button about *me*."

It was not for me to enlighten him, and after a pause he gravely continued :

" You never seemed to mind which of us you talked to—indeed, of the two, you were far more confidential and friendly with the General, and never gave *me* any encouragement. However, I just ran up here to see you. I have had your face before me all the time I've been away shooting, and I seem to have arrived at what they call the psychological moment—when your affairs have come to a crisis ; and the upshot of this long story is—will you marry me ? "

Subsequently we spent an exciting quarter of an hour explaining, arguing, urging, and protesting, for somehow though I felt desperately agitated, and most unspeakably happy, I was frightened by his money and the responsibilities of my future 'position.' However, as might be supposed, it ended in my landing at the boat-house the *fiancée* of Alaric Sandars, and it was promptly arranged by my future lord and master that I was to go straight to the Osbornes as soon as I had put some things together, and there make my preparations for an immediate departure to England.

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" Now that we have despatched our wires, letters, secured passages, and done no end of fagging things—including my interview with Mrs. Hooper—let us discuss the great pearl mystery," said Alaric, as we paced up and down Mrs. Osborne's long verandah, whilst the monsoon torrents poured and splashed outside. " You say you never had them out of your hands but once—and when was that ? "

" The day before I sailed," I replied, " when I was in London with Linda, I broke the string, and we went out and left the necklace at a shop, a middling

sort of jewellers, near our middling sort of hotel, and said we would call back for it that evening, which we did. It was getting dusk, and after a little delay a woman, whom I had not seen before, found the pearls and handed them to me; the charge was three shillings, and we thought it extravagant for just a string of cotton!"

"I see it! I see light!" exclaimed Alaric, coming to a standstill. "By mistake, she gave you another necklace—a necklace of real pearls—and has never been able to trace it! Letty, it must be our first business, when we get home, to find this woman, and restore the treasure-trove."

\* \* \* \* \*

Alaric faithfully fulfilled his promise; he and Linda and I, after some difficulty, discovered the jeweller's shop, but it was closed and "To Let." We enquired for the late tenant, and were informed that his name was Hobhouse; he had had a lot of trouble, become a bankrupt, and completely disappeared. After long and vexatious delay we eventually traced the man to a small seaside town, where he was endeavouring to earn money as a working jeweller, whilst his wife took in a humble class of summer lodgers. In a little formal row of thin red-brick houses we knocked at number nine, and the door was opened by Mrs. Hobhouse herself. When she beheld us she turned a ghastly colour.

"Tom, it's *them*!" she screamed to someone in the back of the premises, "the two girls come at last!" Then she staggered into a musty little sitting-room and collapsed on the sofa in floods of hysterical tears. Her husband now joined us, a thin, careworn man, who was evidently trembling with agitation. As soon as Mrs. Hobhouse could speak (she subsequently did all the talking) she informed us that a most valuable heirloom had been entrusted to

her husband for some slight repairs. It was a family treasure, but her ladyship knew that Hobhouse was as honest as the sun. In the dusk she herself had given me the treasure by mistake, and next day handed the mock pearls to the countess! Of course there was an awful outcry—terrible work. Hobhouse had done everything he could to trace me; employed detectives, and advertised far and wide—even to America—but all to no purpose. They were sued by the countess, who had been deprived of her ancestral pearls—and implacably sold up.

Ruined alike in money and credit—and that just as they were beginning to make a start—no one would believe them—no, not their own relatives; but all the world wondered what they had done with the Warrenford pearls?

I handed them over to Hobhouse when he entered, and never, never shall I forget his gasp of relief. (Strange to say, my own imitation pearls still remained in their possession, and when I departed I carried them away.) Poor people, their joy, ecstasy, and thankfulness was touching; for my own part, I felt painfully overwhelmed as I listened to the list of extraordinary misfortunes of which *I* had been the unconscious cause.

That same evening I wrote to Lady Warrenford, the owner of the pearls; and thanks to her good offices, and a substantial cheque from Alaric, Mr. and Mrs. Hobhouse are once more reinstated, and doing a flourishing business.

Linda and I are no longer Miss Harlowe and Miss Letty Harlowe, but Mrs. Fortescue and Mrs. Sandars. It is Miss Pinfold's proud boast that her prophecy respecting *me* has been nobly fulfilled; thanks to her urgent entreaties and advice, I was persuaded to adventure to India, and, as a natural consequence, had made a magnificent match!

I have no doubt that my inquisitive maid marvels, when arranging the famous Sandars' diamonds and other jewels, she finds treasured among these, a string of very ordinary imitation pearls.

But thereby hangs a tale !

## V

### THE HELPER

“ THE POWER BEHIND THE PEN ”

WHEN the Reverend Maurice Hay died suddenly of heart failure, his parishioners were full of solicitude and sympathy for his orphan girls, Rose and Josephine, who, in spite of youth and good looks, were very popular in Dullditch and its neighbourhood. As it was understood that they had no fortune beyond their pretty faces, no investments, except certain paltry accomplishments, their affairs naturally furnished a subject of burning interest; the villagers laid their heads together, and wondered what on earth the Hay girls were to do ! Lady helps, lady nurses, companions, typists, these attractive and genteel posts were urged upon them, but the Hays decided that they would go together to London, and endeavour to find work as artists. The community disapproved and remonstrated—singly, in couples, and by letter. When these good-natured efforts proved unavailing, it was remembered that the Vicar's daughters had foreign blood in their veins; their mother's father was an Italian, and an Italian painter

—two facts much to be deplored. His queer, roving, Bohemian ideas were manifesting themselves in his descendants; yet it was admitted that the Hay girls had some taste for drawing. Rose's clever black-and-white sketches decorated most of her friends' albums; Josephine painted quite recognisable miniatures—gratis. She had curly brown locks, a merry, round face, a pink-and-white complexion, and resembled one of Cosway's masterpieces.

Rose, with her dark hair and eyes, and ivory skin, was like her own particular branch of art, a charming study in black and white.

The sisters had no near relatives, no one to advise, help, or control them; with regard to their future plans, they were not merely determined, but sanguine. It was their intention to settle in London, and with a few good introductions, and plenty of hard work, they expected to make their fortune, and by and by fly down to visit dear old Dullditch, in a splendid 45 h.p. motor-car!

Those who had interest through friends—or even friends' friends—wrote letters, and did their utmost to give the orphans a start; and before very long, armed with introductions and fortified with advice, they departed full of hope and ambition. At first they dispatched glowing descriptions of their "upper part," the cheapness of London, the numbers and quality of their invitations—and orders; but two years had now passed, correspondence had languished, letters had ceased to arrive at Dullditch, and there was no sign whatever of the 45 h.p. motor-car!

The truth was, the young amateurs had ceased to be a novelty—other more interesting strangers had arrived. London likes a change, the Hays had lost their hold on their little circle; their spirits and good looks were clouded, orders and invitations had become painfully rare, and in the pushing, hustling

world the two pretty sisters were thrust aside, and forgotten.

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It was a wet November evening, and Josephine Hay sat by a fire of cheap, bad coal, awaiting her sister's return from an errand in the City. Their home was the upper part of a shabby little house in West Kensington; here they rented two rooms, back and front, as well as a den on the stairs, which served for cooking—when there was anything to cook. The front apartment was dining-, sitting-room, and studio combined; a deal table, covered with drawing materials, stood in either window, a decrepit horse-hair sofa and a deformed cane chair were drawn up to the fire, and between them was placed a tray, with tea-things, as well as half a stale loaf and a pot of apple and blackberry jam.

By the capricious gleams of the smouldering coals, Josephine was counting the contents of her lean leather purse; count as she would, including coppers and one stamp, the grand total came to one pound, three shillings, and seven pence.

She hastily snapped the purse, and turned on the light, as the door opened to admit her sister, who was a wet and miserable spectacle.

“Oh, Rosie, you are drowned!” she cried.

“Not quite”—coming forward and putting down a flat parcel; “it is a dreadful night.” As she spoke, she peeled off her damp gloves with tender care, and then proceeded to remove her boots. Meanwhile Josephine prepared to make tea.

“There's a boot for you!” Rose said, exhibiting a small dilapidated specimen; “it's like a cullender—they both are; no charwoman would own them!”

“And your stockings are soaking!”

“Oh, they will dry on,” was the courageous

answer, and she held her well-darned hose to the fire.

"No luck, I suppose?" said Josephine after a moment's silence.

"None—I'll tell you all about it, as soon as I've had my tea. I'm so thirsty, and so hungry—and—" Here she reached for the loaf and began to cut it.

"And tired," said her sister, concluding the sentence; "you walked home, Rose, and it's five long miles."

"No, I took a penn'orth of bus—instead of a bun—and now I'll take it out of the loaf, O housekeeper. Ah!" raising a cup of tea to her lips, "this is delicious. I was thinking of this happy moment, as I paddled along in the rain.—What have you done, Joe?"

"I went to Queen's Gate with the miniatures, and saw Miss Wiggin. She was *so* disagreeable, and cross and dissatisfied. She said it was not the least like her—or if it is, she had no idea she was so plain."

"I could have told her that," declared Rose.

"And—she supposed, as it was an order—and she muttered something about charity, which I could not afford to hear—that she must take it—when it was altered to her satisfaction. She insists on a better complexion, and a new nose; so I have brought it home instead of the three guineas—and I know I shall never please her. How did you fare?"

"Much the same! It has been a bad day altogether. I took my illustrations of 'A Drowned Girl's Diary' to Puffit & Smack, and the Art Editor, a superior young man, with a pince-nez and a high-pitched nose, received the sketches between two disdainful fingers, and then examined them through his glasses, and said:

"'Dear me, Miss Hay! These will never do. You have no idea of anatomy; this girl has two

elbows in her arm—and the man is a freak! The editor has complained of your work, and—er—I'm really afraid we cannot—er—accept any more of it; you might try the comic papers.' ”

“ Oh dear! ” ejaculated the housekeeper.

“ Fancy his attempting to be funny, whilst he took the bread out of my mouth. The *Week End* is my only employer, since the *Kestrel* dropped me—and died.”

“ And Miss Wiggin assured *me* that I need not expect any further orders from her friends; she was in earnest, and a temper, so what are we to do? ”

“ Ask old Mrs. Mote to lend us five pounds—or go out and sell matches? ”

“ Oh, Joe, I'd rather sell matches. I should hate to borrow, though she is a dear old thing. Our affairs would be all over Dullditch.”

“ If we are found in a garret starved to death, and the fact is printed in scare lines in the *Daily Mail*, our affairs will also be the talk of the village; however, never say die! I've brought back the sketches, and I'll have another try—it means twenty-five shillings.”

“ And the rent, ” said Josephine. “ I cannot understand how we do so badly—we got on swimmingly at first; visitors, orders, promises, payment, theatre tickets, invitations—and *now!* ”

“ People were kind. We were new, unsophisticated, fresh and green from the country; but only a pair of clever, self-confident amateurs. We have done our best; it is not in us to do more—to excel.”

“ Unless we could go over to Paris, and work there.”

“ Might as well talk of going to heaven.”

“ Goodness knows I work hard, ” continued Josephine, with a catch in her breath; “ I study all the pictures I can, I run into the National Gallery on

free days, and stare, and ponder, and wish, and wonder; but it's all something so far above me—Genius—Genius—Genius ! ”

Her sister nodded a grave assent.

“ I hear girls talking of effect, and atmosphere, and technique, but there is something spiritual in Art, and in the work of great masters; it seems such a waste of a precious gift, when they die, and their marvellous power is lost to the world for ever. Oh, if they could only bequeath their faculties as they bequeath their riches ! How grateful I should be for a tiny legacy—even for a crumb.”

“ And so should I,” agreed Rose, “ the smallest contribution thankfully received; unfortunately there is no use in wishing. We are just a dull, plodding, stupid couple, who have exhausted our resources, and the patience of our—friends. I begin to see myself returning to ‘the Ditch,’ as mother’s help to Mrs. Gull, the baker’s wife; there I shall at least be sure of a roof and bread. Well, there is no use in looking at the worst side of a picture. To-morrow I intend to make a fresh start; I shall copy your figure, and if you like you may borrow my nose, for the miniature. It is nice and straight—my best feature.”

“ Really, Rose, you are wonderful ! ” exclaimed her sister. “ What spirits you have!—no matter what happens, they never seem to sink.”

“ I hope we shall both *swim*—some day,” she answered, rising as she spoke. “ And now that my petticoats and stockings are dry, I am going to bed.”

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“ ‘Pon my word—eh—it’s really—er—yes, quite good ! ” exclaimed the Art Editor. “ Comes all right this time, Miss Hay; it only wanted a little pains, you see ! You were getting slack. This is one of

your best drawings—so much life in it—the anatomy correct—excellent. Did anyone help you?" and he gave her a sharp glance over his glasses.

"Oh no, indeed," she replied eagerly, "it is entirely my own work."

"Is that so?" he answered dubiously. "I must confess that people would hardly credit that this lifeless performance," drawing out a former sketch, "and this," tapping her latest production, "were the work of the same hand. One is the well-meant attempt of an amateur, the other is the—ah, I will not flatter you to your face—it is capital."

"I am so glad you are pleased," said Rose, with a tinge of colour in her pale face—praise and encouragement were indeed rare. "Am I to do the remainder?" she added timidly.

"Oh yes, but in your later style; you may always depend upon commissions if you stick to that. I expect you would like a little cheque," and he sat down and scribbled one for twenty-five shillings; then, as he handed it to her, he cleared his throat, and said, "To be quite frank, this was intended to have been your last payment—but now that you have shown what you can accomplish, when you *try*, I hope we shall continue to do business together. It," and he smiled, "was rather a narrow squeak. I cannot think why you have hitherto hid your light under a bushel. This sketch," once more examining it, "is—er—really quite good."

Here, as the telephone rang passionately, he offered his hand with an air of graceful dismissal, and bowed her to the door.

"Twenty-five shillings and compliments," announced Rose, as she handed the little cheque to her sister.

"Three guineas—and gush!" rejoined Josephine, with a delighted laugh. "Miss Wiggin is enchanted

with your nose—highly flattered, and said it was so admirably truthful to life! She took the miniature away to the drawing-room, and exhibited it to some friends—then she called me in. A man who was an artist talked of ‘fine technical achievement,’ ‘a subtle interpretation of a personality,’ and other grand terms. The main thing was, he *liked* it; and I received two orders. Miss Wiggin was so fascinated with her picture, she kept looking, and looking at it, and could not bear to put it down. She has ordered another copy, and she asked me such an odd question.”

“Your age?—your dressmaker’s address?”

“No, you silly, silly girl, but if I had painted it myself?”

“And you replied, ‘Of course—who else?’”

“Yes, but she said, ‘The reason I ask is, that it is so *very* superior to your general work—such dash—and yet such finish.’”

“I can see that myself. When I was working on it I felt as if I were inspired, and influenced; I was in a sort of raging fever—my brush flew here and there, and instead of making a hideous muddle, every stroke told!”

“Imagine drawing inspiration from the face of a Miss Wiggin!” exclaimed Rose.

“Imagine it, indeed! The miniature is to be exhibited. It may make my fortune. It is good—I feel it in my bones.”

“Poor dear Joe—your bones are prominent enough!”

“At any rate, I believe we have turned the corner. We have four pounds five in hand, and the rent—how shall we spend it?”

“A good lunch, and a matinée?” suggested Rose.

“Certainly not. We spend it—but on boots, real boots, not brown paper—and gloves, the signs of

gentlefolk. Perhaps hats—I know a very cheap place, and appearances are so important.”

“So is food,” broke in her sister; “let us celebrate our good luck with something for supper—sausages on toast, strawberry jam, and sponge-cakes? A feast for the gods!”

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The artists continued to prosper; their tide of success flowed steadily—fortune increased with fame. Miniatures by J. Hay were much sought for; Josephine had more orders than she could execute—her reputation was firmly established. As for Rose—the name of “R. Hay” on a black-and-white sketch was a guarantee of excellence; she illustrated important books, and where once she was thankful for shillings, she now received sovereigns. Former acquaintances recalled the sisters—and their own active benevolence to a couple of struggling strangers—and prided themselves on their perspicuity. They looked up the Hays, deluged them with invitations, and enquired “where they had been hiding for the last twelve months?”

“Nothing succeeds like success.” The portraits of the sister artists appeared in popular papers and magazines, their names in paragraphs, and in lists of guests at various famous houses.

They no longer rented an “upper part,” but a smart and commodious flat in a fashionable locality, and employed two servants, and a Court dressmaker. Their strides in their art were amazing, even to themselves. Once, as Rose completed a spirited sketch, she exclaimed :

“Now this really *is* good! So good, that I can hardly believe I have drawn it myself, but that I am a mere automaton, worked by—a—a—certain—something—a hidden power!”

"Do you know, I have often felt that too," said Josephine, "as if some masterful personality helped me—a peculiar inspiration directed my hand, guided it rapidly, and resolutely, to unerring achievement and success!"

Her sister looked at her with an air of grave surprise. "I wonder if this could be so?" she murmured.

The pen in Josephine's fingers suddenly wrote on the margin of her work the words:

"Yes, it is so."

She stared at the sentence in fascinated silence, then turning hastily about, said:

"Oh, Rose, do come and see what the pen has just written of itself! What can it mean? I declare on my honour I did not originate this."

"I see. . . : I believe it is what is called automatic writing," said Rose, after a significant pause. "I have heard of it. Do try if it will write more. See, here is a sheet of clean paper—now write a question."

"Do you help my sister?" Josephine wrote obediently.

"Yes, and yourself," came the reply.

"We are most grateful to you. Were you a great artist?"

"I am—a great artist," wrote the power behind the pen.

"May we know your name?"

"No."

"What may we call you?"

"Helper."

"Can we do anything for you?"

"Pray."

"Will you continue to help us?"

"Yes. Good-bye."

"Is it not uncanny?" said Josephine. "Do you

think I wrote this?—or the artist?—or is it one of the modern discoveries—my subconscious self coming to the surface?"

"Perhaps," replied Rose, "but it explains all my success, and yours. The help arrived precisely when we were at our wits' end. Don't you remember, that wet November night—how we talked of lost gifts, and inspiration? I believe he came then."

"Yes, I remember that night well."

"We were two wretched little painstaking amateurs, without one spark, or glimmer, of genius. Now we are 'true artists'; even the wickedest critic admits this. The Helper has been our master, has taught us, and set his own work once more before the public, drawn by our feeble fingers; it is the hand of the dead reincarnated in ours—we are in tune with some unknown mystery."

"Yes, and we had better keep the mystery to ourselves," said Rose the practical, and she stood up, and put the sheet of paper in the fire.

"Do you think it wrong, Rosie?—are we what is called 'possessed'?"

"No—did he not ask us to pray? And we will. Why should not a departed spirit show kindness, and give charity to others? You and I are the objects of his benevolence—but for him, God knows what would have become of us!"

After this experience, it became an everyday matter to carry on a little correspondence with the Helper, who proved to be the Hays' mainstay for many months; but at last he gave notice of his departure, in these words:

"You can now walk, and work alone—and another sorely needs assistance."

"For a picture?" wrote Josephine.

"Yes, an important picture, which may make his fortune. A picture like this," and with a few telling

strokes the pen rapidly sketched a desert scene, a sunset, and a great caravan, with many kneeling figures; in the foreground two horses and two men; in the far distance, a passing sandstorm. Under this sketch the pen wrote, 'Good-bye.'

"How we shall miss him," said Rose, with a sigh; "though it is true that we are able to walk alone,—especially since we have had those lessons in Paris."

"I shall always treasure the sketch," said her sister, "our Helper's last writing, and message. I shall lock it away in my desk."

Two years elapsed, and 'R. and J. Hay' continued to prosper; they visited Dullditch—but not by motor—and during a holiday on the Continent happened by chance to enter a fine exhibition of modern paintings.

As she moved along slowly and conscientiously, catalogue in hand, Rose was accosted by Josephine, who looked so agitated and pale, that she was justly alarmed.

"Are you ill?" she asked. "What is it?"

"*The picture is here*," she whispered excitedly. "Come, it is in the next room—the Helper's picture of the desert. Oh, it is a masterpiece!—I could scarcely get near it for the crowd."

Then, when at last an opening was obtained, Rose beheld the finished result of the sketch in her sister's desk—correct in every particular.

There was the vast desert, the passing of a great sandstorm, the setting of a red sun, and a halted caravan. It was the hour of prayer and thanksgiving; a multitude of the faithful had prostrated themselves towards Mecca; in the foreground, two Europeans, dismounted, held their Arab horses, as they stood bare-headed, gazing towards the east.

On referring to the catalogue, the sisters read:

"409.—After the Sirocco. Anon."

## VI

## THE FATAL PARAGRAPH

## A TRAGEDY

It is scarcely possible that many women have led a more dull, monotonous, miserable life than Annie Fleude; actual want, and the real nip of actual poverty, with some variety and excitement, would have been preferable! All her days since she left school—and she was now thirty—had been dedicated to querulous old people. Her uncle, a paralytic, who lived at Camberwell—in a gloomy, semi-detached house overlooking a damp garden—had engrossed the entire summer of her youth. Her stagnant existence had been narrowed to the routine of the household, and the only breaks she enjoyed were an occasional Sunday School Treat, a Magic Lantern Lecture, or a Summer Sale!

When Mr. Jonas Fleude died he left his niece thirty pounds a year, and figuratively handed her on to his sister, Mrs. Pyzer, a deaf old lady residing in the Midlands, and here, if possible, Annie's case was worse—she had jumped out of the frying-pan into the fire!

The locality in which Mrs. Pyzer resided was neither town, village, nor country, but combined all the drawbacks, and none of the advantages, of the three. Battsbridge was a collection of houses near a cross-road in Flatshire. These had been built in the immediate vicinity of a once celebrated posting inn—a hostelry of no little importance in the old coaching days. It was situated on the great North Road—cautiously aloof from the temptations of a market

town—capable of accommodating many guests, and its stables received one hundred and fifty horses. But time and the railway had brought changes, and diverted the traffic elsewhere. The stables fell into ruins, the inn was turned into six cottages, and the inn's parasites alone remained!—four substantial detached houses of the Georgian period, red-faced, ugly, and close to the road, with little mean enclosures, flagged paths in front, and large straggling gardens at the rear. They were of different sizes and ages, but were all at the same side of the highway, facing north, and resembled substantial suburban residences which had ventured into the country—and gone astray!

Besides these houses, Battsbridge boasted a large forge and a tiny post-office—where sweets, tobacco, and stationery were sold. The parish church was two miles by road—and one mile across the fields and stiles. The nearest town and railway-station was four miles distant along a dreary, monotonous stretch of the great North Road. Here, at Idleford, a fine old county town, were shops, a market square, a town hall, two churches, and a considerable railway-station. It was one of Ann Fleude's few relaxations to plod to this station, buy a paper or two from the tempting bookstall, watch the passengers depart and arrive, and witness the great Scotch expresses, with their huge green engines, thunder by. She often lingered for the best part of an hour (there was nothing attractive awaiting her at home), solaced herself with refreshment-room tea and buns, and boldly pretended that she was expecting the arrival of a friend! These expeditions to Idleford station were her gala days—think of it! Her aunt, Mrs. Pyzer, was ill-tempered, tyrannical, rheumatic, and deaf. Her two servants, ancient retainers, were elderly women settled in their ways; the rooms were low and dark, and held a per-

petual atmosphere of mouldy hay. No sun ever entered them, and with the consent of Mrs. Pyzer and her servants—no *air*. The furniture dated from the epoch of the old lady's marriage—when black horse-hair and solid mahogany was the rage; the beds were four-posters, with bolsters and mattresses stuffed with rank and noisome feathers of fabulous age: the whole character of the house was to correspond—nothing young or modern was ever to be found within it. Its mistress objected to new-fangled ways, she disliked cut flowers, pet animals, or even birds, and lived apparently in a world of her own—the past.

Mrs. Pyzer did not appear till lunch-time, and then she was always accompanied by shawls, cushions, and her ear-trumpet. Her food consisted of mince and milk puddings; her drink was hot brandy and water. She subscribed to the parish magazine, a local weekly paper, and some missionary journals, but set her face sternly against novels, cards and callers. The oldest and (in her own opinion) most respected residence of Battsbridge, she believed that she had done a deed of remarkable benevolence in giving a home to her niece Annie, whom she looked upon as a mere child—but nevertheless expected her to share the tastes of a woman who was eighty-one last birthday.

Mr. Jones, the doctor, and his wife, resided at Battsbridge, also two faded old sisters, the Misses Horn-Finch, and in the largest and most important of the four houses dwelt the widow of a late rector, a certain Mrs. Brandon, who considered herself, like her abode, to be vastly superior to her neighbours. She owned the largest garden, also a thatched arbour, and a greenhouse, kept three maids, and was visited by the County; and it was to Mrs. Brandon that Annie Fleude looked for all her little pleasures. Now and then she lent her a book—a new novel—or invited her

to tea, or took her out driving, when she hired a brougham from Idleford, and made a few calls (leaving Annie meanwhile sitting in the carriage). Annie was not acquainted with the resident gentry; indeed, it was no secret that her father had been a bankrupt auctioneer—though Mrs. Pyzer, his sister, had married far above her deserts, a retired Major from a West Indian regiment, and always spoke of herself as “a Military Lady.”

Annie’s days were all precisely alike—week after week—month after month—year after year. As soon as she had breakfasted, she dusted the drawing-room, did some sewing and mending, and watered the plants in the frame. They dined at three o’clock; when she had settled her aunt, told her all the news, and left her to doze, she went forth on the household messages, such as to a farm for eggs and butter, to a cottager for chickens, or for a solitary aimless walk along the country road; then came seven o’clock tea, a game of backgammon, a bowl of bread and milk, and to bed—and the next morning *da capo*.

Annie Fleude had endured this existence for three weary years, notwithstanding determined and desperate efforts to effect a release. She walked to church twice on Sundays, and in all weathers, and taught laboriously in the Sunday-school, until the announcement of the curate’s marriage—the wretch had been secretly engaged for years! Then there was the Rector, a hale, rosy-cheeked old gentleman of seventy—he was undoubtedly flattered by her profound interest in his sermons; he lent her books, she knitted him socks, accepted his invitation to tea, and to see his roses; all was going admirably, till some wicked interfering person sounded a note of alarm, and one of his married daughters appeared upon the scene—so *that* chance of escape was barred! There was a yearly subscription ball in Idleford. To this

Miss Fleude went once, wearing a new black net gown, her hair beautifully dressed, and chaperoned by the doctor's wife—but alas, she was a wallflower! No one noticed her, or “requested the pleasure of a dance,” except the young man from the station book-stall, and the chemist's assistant.

There were various bazaars, where Miss A. Fleude served on committees, and assisted at stalls, carried dolls for raffles, dipped in bran-pies, and was gay, vivacious, and useful, and pretended to enjoy herself! Local ladies, when comparing notes, said :

“That Miss Fleude at Battsbridge isn't a bad sort of person—I shall ask her to help me at my rummage sale.”

But even at the rummage sales poor Annie failed to find a likely suitor! And yet poor Annie was not plain: tall, flat-backed, with rather a long face, thick brown hair, fine brown eyes, a passable nose, and beautiful white teeth. Sometimes she would stare at herself in her little spotted mirror, with a drawer beneath it, and shake her head at her reflection, and say :

“Oh, you wretched, blighted sort of creature! Whatever were you born for, I should like to know? Have you ever had one really happy day to look back upon—one splendid, dazzling hour? And yet you are not ugly, you are not an idiot, you have thirty pounds a year—and more to come. But what is the good of it all? No one wants you—you are like a thing in prison, and the best that could happen to you would be to have a nice, easy, painless sort of illness—and to die!”

As she thus wished for her own demise, tears would rise into her eyes and trickle down her face; then she would shake her fist at her reflection, and say :

“Annie, you must buck up! When things come to the worst, they mend. I'll subscribe to the library,

I'll buy a bicycle, and I'll stick up for myself more than I do; everyone imposes on *me* because I am so good-natured. I'm called 'Gentle Annie.' I mend Mrs. Brandon's lace—yes, and her stockings—I go messages for the Finches, and I teach the Jones' child music. I take the smallest piece of cake, the weakest cup of tea—but I'm not going to be good-natured and gentle any more, but fierce and aggressive, and fighting, and I'll just see how that will answer!"

But these good resolutions were generally of short duration—her courage evaporated within an hour; she had arranged her aunt's knitting, shrieked through the ear-trumpet till she was hoarse, undertook other people's distasteful tasks, and was just as obedient, "gentle," and good-natured as ever.

At last cruel Fortune remembered her captive, the unfortunate woman, who never had a gleam of sun in her life, who had no one to love and to care for—for who could care for Mrs. Pyzer? a passionate, selfish, and greedy old beldame—a woman whose life was passing away, as if she were a stone at the bottom of a disused well.

Light and hope came to Annie through the misfortune of another. Mrs. Brandon, who had been becoming more and more near-sighted, had recently consulted a specialist, who announced "cataract on both eyes." This was a terrible verdict to a woman so fond of reading, so active in her garden, and such an indefatigable correspondent. However, after the first shock, she pulled herself together, and seriously considered the situation. She would be obliged to employ a companion and secretary—what a bore to have a strange woman (who would probably be odious) with her continually day after day, and she becoming blinder and blinder, and falling by degrees into that other woman's power. A stranger would read her letters, would see her accounts, examine her

bank-book, and would probably require a handsome salary. Mrs. Brandon began to look through a list of her connections. There was Constance Talbot, a woman of a certain age, who would no doubt be glad of a temporary home; but she would never stand the dulness of the place, and always be wanting to run about the country, to lunch, and bridge. Then there was her widowed niece, Mrs. Forrest; but she had such an awful tongue, and was a most dangerous gossip. No, no, Sissie Forrest would never do. Suddenly an idea dawned upon her! Why should she not make use of good-natured Annie Fleude, who had ample time on her hands, a pleasant voice, and wrote a good hand? She need not pay her a penny—on the contrary, Annie would look upon the employment as an honour, and a favour; she would be only too thankful for a few hours to escape from that odious, deaf old woman.

Mrs. Brandon in appearance was tall, commanding, and arrogant, with a high aquiline nose and piercing black eyes. In character she was hard, determined and ambitious; her manner to her inferiors was uncertain. One day she would be confidential, and even sympathetic, another distant, and disagreeable. It was no secret that she had a handsome fortune (twelve hundred a year) when as an heiress who was "getting on," she had given her hand to the Rector of Froom, and resignedly settled herself to enact the *rôle* of parson's wife. The Rector had survived ten years, and died, leaving his widow a well-to-do matron, with one son, who had now been in India for a considerable time.

As soon as Mrs. Brandon had made up her mind about a suitable companion, she sent in for Annie Fleude, and having bitterly bewailed her sad circumstances, threw herself upon her kindness and good-nature—but made no mention of any remuneration;

and Annie, who was only too pleased to find that she could be of valuable assistance to such an important neighbour, entered upon her duties without delay. But the Misses Horn-Finch (ever interested in other people's affairs) took counsel with the doctor's wife, and the curate's bride, and said :

"Mrs. Brandon really ought to pay—she can well afford it, but she is very mean in some ways. She uses Annie as a companion, makes her read all the papers, write all her letters, and manage the house."

But Annie enjoyed this; Mrs. Brandon's garden was pleasant to sit in, indoors her armchairs were delightfully comfortable, her tea was fragrant, and her cakes delicious. Annie had the pleasure of reading the latest news, and the newest books, she met numbers of nice people in Mrs. Brandon's modern drawing-room—although she was never introduced to them—she liked to see their smart clothes, and listen to their smart talk. And as for acting as amanuensis—that was the best of all! Miss Fleude's own correspondence was pathetically scanty, and if she liked one thing better than another, it was to receive a letter. The few who wrote to her were old school-fellows, at long intervals, and one or two neighbours in Camberwell. Sometimes for days and days the stolid postman would walk past Mrs. Pyzer's door, and on two or three occasions Annie had actually addressed and posted a paper to herself in Idleford—simply in order to hear his familiar knock! Now she enjoyed the reading and writing of letters every day. Once a week Mrs. Brandon dictated a long epistle to her son, who had an appointment in India (something to do with indigo). Every one of Mrs. Brandon's friends had heard of "Cecil," of his extraordinary cleverness at school, his social successes, his devotion to his parent—but no one had seen him, for Mrs. Brandon had only come to Battsbridge with-

in the last five years. How exciting it was to be corresponding with a young man, to receive and read all his replies; these came almost every mail, and were subsequently secured by elastic bands, and tidily stored in a japanned box. Annie had been obliged to explain herself, in her first letter, as the secretary who was temporarily his mother's pen and eyes, and he sent her charming little messages of thanks, and said :

“ How nice and clearly you write, Miss Secretary. It is delightful to read such handwriting.” Whereupon his mother exclaimed, “ Tut, tut, tut ! ” but Annie took greater pains than ever. She, however, had wit enough to realise that Mrs. Brandon was a bitterly jealous mother, and that she must be extremely cautious, and never obtrude her own personality. The Indian letters were really interesting, and invariably full of Cecil Brandon; a less experienced eye might have considered his descriptions florid and exaggerated, and declared that there was rather too much of the wonderful exploits of the writer. It is always so easy to give oneself the *beau rôle* in a letter !

Cecil Brandon was in the local volunteers; his mother explained that he had failed for the Army at home, not through his own fault (of course), and that as she had a good deal of family interest, she had found him an excellent post in the Bengal Presidency. He was delighted with India; the life out there suited him, even the climate was not to be condemned. Poor Cecil had always a delicate chest, and the winters at home had been trying. Sometimes towards the end of one of his most interesting and affectionate letters, there would be a playful request for a little cheque.

“ You see, he is obliged to keep up his position, and entertain,” explained his mother; “ I’m afraid he is rather inclined to be extravagant, and that he

can't help, poor boy. He takes after his grandfather, Carlyon of Carlyon, and has blue blood in his veins."

Then she would contemplate her own long hands, and say, "Blue blood!—blue blood is *always* generous," and yet, at the moment, she was making use of Annie Fleude, and not giving her the smallest return. "Cecil is all I have," she would exclaim, "and I am ambitious for him—ambition is my one weakness. There was never much outlook in the Church for the aspirations of a Rector's wife—even if she is well born—but her son in India is different. I believe Cecil will make himself a name."

Then she would take up his photograph, and hold it close to her dim eyes. Cecil's photographs were numerous, in many styles and many sizes: in volunteer uniform, dark green and silver, in a racing jacket, Indian shikar kit, fancy dress, or plain mufti. His best portraits were large, merely the head and shoulders, showing a face with thick wavy hair, a wide forehead, well-opened eyes, and a large black moustache.

Between his letters, his mother's copious reminiscences, and his many photographs, Annie was already in love with Cecil Brandon—her very first and possibly her very last romance. Once she stealthily slipped a violet into the envelope, and he, in return, sent her a leaf of lemon-scented verbena, with a line, "For the pretty secretary."—Needless to say, she did not read this aloud.

She treasured the leaf and its inscription, and oh, folly! put them into a tiny gold locket—but then, you see, the poor thing had had so little in her life!

It had been a trying winter. Mrs. Pyzer, who had long been feeble, had now what is called "broken up." The backgammon board and the big knitting-pins were put away in a cupboard—they were not likely ever to be wanted again. Owing to her aunt's

condition, Annie was more mistress of her own time; she ordered the meals, altered the hours, and the old servants offered no resistance. A will had been made, and they had reason to believe that they had both been "well remembered."

"It won't be long now," they remarked to one another, as they discussed plans over their tea-pot; "the house and furniture and a small income will go to Miss Fleude; well, she deserves something—she has had a poor time, and is getting on."

Meanwhile Cecil Brandon's letters increased in number and interest; lately he seemed to have done a great deal of racing; he described his successes, the club dinners, the compliments paid him, and how he had been riding for a native prince who had overwhelmed him with thanks, and presented him with a magnificent pin. Of his own particular business there was little information, but a great deal respecting the Lucknow "week."

One day a letter arrived; it was short, a mere scrawl, written in a shaky hand. It said:

"DARLING OLD MUM,

"Don't be frightened, but I have been very seedy; I have had a bad go of fever, which I can't shake off, and the doctors say I must go home, so I start in a week."

"In a week!" repeated Mrs. Brandon. "Why, then he will be here in a few days! Oh, oh, to think of it, and he will find me nearly stone-blind! Who is to get the house ready, and his room, and order things?—I am so helpless that I must leave this to strangers, my poor darling sick boy."

It is scarcely necessary to mention that Annie worked *con amore*; fresh white curtains were hung up, new rugs were laid down, the garden was robbed of flowers, and the old house seemed quite gay and

festive. As for Annie herself, she had become years younger, and did not look a day more than five and twenty. She invested in a neat tailor-made and an expensive hat, took lessons in dressing and waving her hair, and presented an unusually smart appearance. As the critical time drew nearer she could scarcely sleep with excitement; for once in her life, when she did wake up in the morning, there was something to look forward to! At last the great day dawned, and the traveller arrived from Idleford in a station cab, which rocked and tottered under piles of shabby baggage.

As Cecil Brandon descended at his mother's gate, Annie with beating pulses inspected him over her window-blind. Oh, such a little shrivelled, sallow man! He looked fifty, and terribly ill! In spite of her severe disappointment, Miss Fleude's kind heart went out to him on the spot, with a sort of almost maternal affection.

The following morning, with her hair beautifully waved, and wearing the new tailor-made, she went next door to resume her duties, and make the acquaintance of Mrs. Brandon's celebrated son. She found him delighted to see her, most agreeable and charming. His mother, however, had one of her bad days, and was coldly patronising, and distant. No one would suppose for a moment that all the successful preparations and clever arrangements were entirely due to the exertions of her visitor.

It was really surprising the number of matrons with unmarried daughters who now came to call on Mrs. Brandon, and make tender enquiries about her eyesight.

Little Cecil was undoubtedly a ladies' man, and enjoyed tea-parties and luncheons, dinners and bridge; but Annie was his first, his *home* friend. Many a day he stole in to see her, or they conferred

together in his mother's summer-house—he having assured his parent that he was about to walk into Idleford, or starting for an afternoon's fishing, or golf.

"The mater is deadly jealous of *you*," he explained, "but you must not mind her—she knows I am awfully gone on you, and that's the reason she has got her frills up."

And indeed, in these latter days, Mrs. Brandon allowed herself to be offensively rude to her secretary and companion. If she could have dispensed with her services she would have done so; but who was to write her letters? Who was to read her the morning paper? Certainly *not* Cecil, who rarely got out of his bed before eleven o'clock. Her increasing blindness made her frantic; she had an instinctive feeling that something hateful was going on around her, a something that she could not see, or divine. After all, Cecil might flirt with Annie as much as he pleased—a woman a head over him, thirty years of age, and a nobody! Her name was really Flood, but some of her insignificant relations had changed it into Fleude. They might change the spelling of the name, but they could not change their status in life. Cecil must marry well, a somebody, and an heiress, and as soon as her eyes had been operated upon she was determined to look about her in good earnest.

Meanwhile the happy pair were privately engaged; they walked together, they bicycled boldly into Idleford, they sat in the summer-house, and Cecil talked of himself continually. One of Annie's chief attractions was the fact that she was a most patient and appreciative listener. He really never tired of relating his wonderful exploits: the mad horses he had ridden, the snakes he had destroyed, and the tigers he had shot; in all these stories he filled the *rôle* of a hero, brave to rashness; and it happened that one day Annie had an opportunity of judging of his

courage for herself ! A wild bullock, which was being led along the country road, had broken away from its drover, and, with tail up, and head down, came charging towards them.

“Look out, look out !” shrieked Cecil—it was almost the scream of a woman ; without another word, he disappeared over a wall with the agility of a monkey, and Annie was left to face the coming adventure alone ! She stood her ground bravely, and as the beast charged, she dashed at him with an open umbrella, which fortunately had the effect of scaring the animal ; and the valiant lady found herself scathless and breathless. By and by, she saw two hands and a little head appearing above the wall, and a squeaky voice enquired :

“Is he gone ? Is the coast clear ?” On receiving an encouraging affirmative—and without blush, or shame—Cecil pulled himself up, and dropped into the road. “They don’t often attack a woman—at least, that is my experience in India,” he explained, “or of course I wouldn’t have left you ; but the fact is—and I make no secret of it to you—since I have had this awful go of fever my nerves have completely gone to pieces ! India has skinned them raw.”

After this episode, it is not improbable that Annie accepted her lover’s amazing experiences with more than a pinch of salt.

One evening, in the dusk in the summer-house, he confided to her that he had been in an infernal scrape in India. It was all about a race, or rather racing ; of course he was as innocent as a new-born babe, but he had been obliged to chuck it, and bolt ! The doctor’s certificate was a mere excuse. By degrees he would break this news to the Mum ; she would be furious at first, but she would soon see that he had been a mere tool in the matter, the cat’s-paw of others ;

and she was so clever and influential that she would soon find him another and better billet.

Annie was not horrified by this confession ; on the contrary she consoled him, comforted him with her assurance of his mother's loyal belief in him, and herself swallowed every word of his plausible excuses.

These were Annie's happy days ; for if Cecil did play golf with the Miss Grants, or tennis with the Miss Thornhills, he spent his evenings with her, slipping in (after his mother and the servants had gone to bed) through an open back window, and they had chicken mayonnaise, and various other delicacies, prepared by Annie's clever hands, washed down with Burgundy, or whisky and seltzer ; and Cecil smoked —yes, actually a meerschaum in Mrs. Pyzer's dining-room—a room in which a pipe had not been lit for half a century ! It is scarcely necessary to mention that the two servants were fully aware of these secret orgies, but they held their tongues, assented to the preparations, and washed up the plates ; for it would suit them, supposing, as they expressed it, “ anything happened,” to remain on. Shortly after this, something did “ happen.” Old Mrs. Pyzer died, and Annie Fleude, now mistress of the house, reigned in her stead.

\*       \*       \*       \*       \*

The operation for cataract proved immediately afterwards successful ; and Mrs. Brandon had her eyes opened in another direction, and an entirely different fashion, by a friend. Cecil, she was informed, “ had got into a most shocking scrape about racing ; it was really scandalous and notorious ; the talk of all the sporting men in India ” ; but, after her first anger, the fond mother succumbed to her son's plausible excuses and caresses, and endeavoured—since the East

was closed to him—to find him another post. To this he was rather averse, and suggested living at home, and being her companion and comfort; but Charlotte Brandon was a Spartan mother, and determined that her boy should go forth once more into the world's battle, and make himself a name. The benighted parent was ignorant of the fact that he had already made "a name" as the shadiest gentleman rider in India—and a thorough-paced little scamp.

Presently the engagement was breathed into her ear. To this, however, she failed to show the same indulgence. The ungrateful old woman was beside herself with fury, heaped abuse on deceitful, scheming Ann, and forbade her her presence, and her house.

Her tongue became venomous, as she assured her dear Cecil that it was bad enough for him to disgrace himself in India, but to come home and marry and settle down beside her, with a vulgar old maid—never!

"Give her up!" she cried, "give her up at once, or I will never leave you a penny, and I shall alter my will."

She looked, as she was, cold, cast-iron, and nothing he could do or say would melt her decision. So he was compelled to agree. He had one long and tearful interview with Annie; this took place in the musty old dining-room—from which his sobs and hers were audible in the kitchen—but on the following day, when walking with his mother and encountering his lady-love out of doors, he passed her without acknowledgment—and looked the other way.

Poor Miss Annie Fleude was broken-hearted; she wrote Cecil many piteous, passionate letters, all unavailing; for he was a weak little fellow, ever dominated by a stronger will, and hence his defection and silence.

The story of his racing had somehow reached England. How tiresome it is that in cases where one would like to keep matters *quiet*, almost every person one meets has relations out in India! Girls and their parents now suddenly cooled; invitations ceased, even although Cecil Brandon would have £1,200 a year on the death of his mother, and was undeniably well connected. However, Mrs. Brandon exerted herself amazingly. She wrote letters (with her own hand)—dozen of letters, and she carried Ceci away from Battsbridge to London, and at last found him a promising appointment in the Belgian Congo. It offered fine pay; her son could stand a warm climate, he had a knack of picking up languages, and he would return home in two years. In short, it was a first-rate opening! When all had been arranged, the little man wrote to Annie to inform her of his prospects, and to say good-bye. In reply to this letter, she immediately went up to London and sought an interview with him and his mother at their hotel. She was desperate, and determined not to lose her little lover without a life and death struggle. At first she was piteous and heart-broken—foolishly endeavouring to work upon Mrs. Brandon's feelings.

"I served you for a whole year," she declared brokenly. "Could a daughter have done more for you than I did? Your son loves me, and I love him; I will make him a good wife. I have enough to live on, since my aunt is dead. The house is mine, he will be close to you, and you will have his society, and the comfort of his being near you. I beg and implore you not to send him away to the Congo; it is an awful place; he is all you have, and he is all I have—let us live at Battsbridge, and be happy. If you insist on his going to Africa it will break my heart, for something tells me that I shall never, never—see him again."

Suddenly she began to sob hysterically, and falling upon her knees, endeavoured to take Mrs. Brandon's hand in hers; but Mrs. Brandon pushed her away with surprising violence, and rising from her chair, said:

"Cecil is going to Africa—I am sending him there on purpose to place him out of *your* reach!"

"O, you are a hard, hard woman!" said Annie, struggling to her feet. "Will nothing I can do, or say, change you or soften your heart?"

"Nothing."

Annie now turned and appealed to Cecil, and in vain. The battle between two strong women for a weak man raged, but in the end the mother won. Out on the lobby Cecil contrived to snatch a few moments with Annie, assuring her that it would be all right, and that they would be true to one another, and be married when he returned in two years' time.

"Stand up for yourself now," she answered fiercely, "stand up for yourself, and me; you are a man, you are five and thirty, and should know your own mind. We can be independent of your mother, and I am ready to marry you to-morrow!"

"No, no, no," he replied, "the mater has so much in her power, I dare not risk it. Think of all she has to leave; and if she says that she will cut me off with a shilling, by Jove, she'll do it! We will just bide our time—it will soon pass," he declared, with cheerful optimism, "and you and I will be married when I come back."

"If you allow your mother to drive you out of the country," said Annie, and her face was white and rigid, "I tell you—that you will *never* come back!"

At this he gave a funny little cackling laugh, and said:

"I bet you I will! I lay you fifty to one—eh?"

But Annie made no reply. She turned abruptly

away, walked slowly down the red carpeted stairs of the hotel, and never once looked back. It was done—it was all over ! Useless to attempt to dissuade him—he was as wax in the hands of his parent.

Annie travelled to Battsbridge, a changed woman, and shut herself up in her dismal house for many weeks. From time to time—through the neighbours' talk—she heard that Cecil Brandon was doing capitally in the Congo, had been promoted to a post in the rubber district, far up in the Interior, exerted a wonderful influence on the natives, and had achieved success at last !

Eight months had elapsed, when the district was electrified by the news of his death. A brief telegram announced that he had been suddenly carried off by a virulent fever, prevalent in the jungles. His mother was prostrate and inconsolable; but by and by she roused herself sufficiently to dispatch a beautiful white marble tombstone to be erected over Cecil's grave. The common grief had not drawn her and her neighbour any closer together; on the contrary, Annie was now a hard, hopeless, embittered creature, who burnt with inextinguishable rage against a mother who had murdered her son. Oh, that she could punish her ! Oh, that she might avenge him ! Vainly and vainly did she cast about in search of a weapon. At last—she found it !

Miss Fleude, who was now comfortably off, expended a good deal of money on books, magazines, and journals; and, since Cecil had been in Africa, had subscribed to many African papers. By chance an ill-printed West Coast "rag" fell into her hands, and there she found, with other weird information, a terrible story of cannibalism—in which no ghastly detail was spared.

It appeared that a certain unpopular, tyrannical overseer had visited an outlying village; that in the

jungle, on his return towards headquarters, he had become mysteriously separated from his escort, and some of the natives, finding him, seized and carried him off, a prisoner. These happened to be of the Lokele, a tribe of well-known river cannibals, who wore necklaces of the teeth of those whom they had eaten. Such had been unquestionably the fate of the unfortunate official, whose boots and pocket-book were found, and whose name it had been proved was "C. Brandon."

When the agonised reader had come to the end of this description, she fainted dead away, and was subsequently confined to her bed for a whole week. At the end of the week Miss Fleude had recovered her strength, renewed her animosity, and rekindled her hatred; she marked the terrible paragraph with three crosses in ink, folded the paper neatly, and then addressed and posted it to her next-door neighbour.

It had even more than the desired effect!

Shortly after the postman's arrival the following morning, a grating shriek rang through the house, and when the servants ran to see what had happened, they found Mrs. Brandon lying back in her chair, with staring open eyes, quite dead—with the fatal journal clenched in her hands.

Miss Fleude still continues to reside at Battsbridge; she is kind and charitable to the poor, but holds herself coldly aloof from her neighbours, who, to tell the truth, are secretly afraid of the lady, and no longer speak of her as "Gentle Annie."

## VII

## THE SHIP'S CAT

JACK TRUMAN, till recently the heir of a man of large property, but now a mere pauper without home or profession, sat in a big morocco-covered chair, with his hands in his pockets, listening to his future father-in-law, Boaz Pottinger, Esq., whilst he expounded his opinions, and more or less laid down the law.

Mr. Pottinger had acquired a fortune in chemical works, and it was his almost daily boast that he was "a self-made man." His detractors declared that this was not much to be proud of, and that Boaz Pottinger, ugly, ungainly, uncouth, had omitted to supply himself with the letter "h." However, he had a ladylike wife, a pretty daughter, and half a million, so when he bought a place in Kent the neighbours figuratively made room for him. No one was more friendly than the Squire of the parish, Hildebrande Truman, whose ancestors were Crusaders, and who had never earned a penny in his life. As times were bad for agriculturists, Mr. Truman attempted to make some money in speculation, but kept his endeavours to himself, intending to treat his wife and family to a delightful surprise! Unfortunately, the surprise was not of the nature he anticipated. On the collapse of a monstrous financial swindle he became liable, involved, ruined, and within a few months, Daines Place, its estates and messuages and heirlooms, were brought to the hammer, and sold. The shock, and the shame, had killed the Squire, and now here was the Squire's son listening to Mr. Pottinger's ideas on the subject of his future!

Mr. Pottinger enjoyed the sound of his own voice as he lay back in his chair, with his thick white fingers meeting at the tips, his eyes fixed on a corner of a bookcase. He said :

" You see, Jack, my boy, everything is altered now the poor Squire has gone, and scarcely left a penny piece—or anyway not more than will keep your mother and sisters in a small way. If he had only given *me* a hint of what he was after, I'd have warned him.. I know all about the smiling scoundrels, that rob honest folks, not of shillings, but of 'undreds of thousands of pounds, and call themselves honourable men. Well, if I'd 'ad a 'int, you would not be sitting there—without an acre to your name!"

" No," sighed the young man, " but there is no use in going over that now, and the governor meant it all for the best. The question is, what am I to do to make a living for Nancy and myself ? "

" Talk of making your own living, my son.—We will leave Nancy out of the business."

" But Nancy is engaged to me, with your consent, and she intends to stick to me—and I to her."

" Circumstances have changed since this time last year. Then you were heir to a fine property, and would 'ave 'ad a suitable allowance. Now what 'ave you got ? What are you and Nancy going to live on —tell me that ? 'Ow are you going to put a 'ouse over 'er 'ead ? "

" That is just the crucial question," replied young Truman, rising to his feet. He was slight and well made, with a square chin, and fine head—the typical young Britisher who has been to Eton and Oxford ; his clothes and boots were the perfection of cut—in short, he appeared what he was, a good-looking man of fashion, who had never earned, or lacked, a sovereign in his life.

" You have no profession," resumed Mr. Pottinger.

"No, that's the worst of it. I did not care about the Army—I wanted to be a sailor, and my mother struck; and here I am—at twenty-four—an incapable idiot!"

"But you can turn your hand to something."

"I can ride to hounds, and manage a boat, I'm a bit of a carpenter, I can photograph, and I know something of machinery."

"There's not a penny in any of them for you," declared the old man brusquely; "you're a *hamateur*."

"I was thinking if I took up a small farm, sir, I might—"

"Put it out of your 'ead," brusquely interrupted Mr. Pottinger; "and now I've been thinking, and it comes to this. Of course I *could* say you and Nancy was never to see one another again."

"Yes, you could say it," rejoined the other significantly.

"Nancy will never go against me; if she did—" Here he nodded his head with alarming significance.

"Have you any suggestion to make, sir? You seemed to have some proposition."

"I 'ave—it's this. Suppose you go off for three years wherever you like—it must be out of Great Britain—and you will not correspond with Nancy more than every six months. You will go into the world like a man, not like a dressed-up young nin-compoop, and make ten thousand pounds. When you bring me that, I will put forty thousand to it and give you Nancy."

"My good sir!" gasped Jack Truman, standing squarely before him. "You might as well ask me to bring you back the moon! Ten thousand pounds—ten *thousand* pounds!"

"Some men pick it up in Wall Street in one afternoon—some make it by a stroke of the pen. Why!"

I've even been told—but I don't believe it—that women get as much as that for a novel!"

"All these are clever people—they have capital, or brains, or both. I have neither one nor the other."

"Oh ho! so you are going to cry off—and not take up my challenge, eh?"

"If I thought I had the very smallest chance—of—winning, you know I'd jump at it like a shot."

"Well, take my advice, and jump," said Mr. Pottinger, rising with a mighty effort—he was a seventeen-stone man. "I'll give you two days to consider it, and now you may be off, and talk it over with Nancy. I like you, Jack, always did, you know; but I'm not going to give my little girl to a fellow that has not some stuff in him—that is not worth 'is salt. Why, look at *me*! I made myself what I ham! No, you just go and see if you can't do something on the same pattern," and he blundered heavily out of the library.

Nancy Pottinger was twenty, a pretty little dark-eyed girl, animated and energetic, clever, resourceful, and plucky.

"Such an idea, Jack!" she exclaimed. "The three years are horrible to contemplate, but imagine father thinking of anything so romantic! Lately he has been devouring old tales about knights sallying forth in quest of adventures, and returning, after many dangers, to their lady loves, to be crowned with wreaths and glory. I'm positive daddy got his idea from 'Sir Baldwin's Quest.' I saw him reading it, the last month; he reads very slowly and digests every word. It has given him an idea, and he will stick to it. When he grasps an *idea*, he never lets it go. And if I were to run away with you, and marry you, and live with you on sixpence a week, he would be sorry for us, but he would never help us—never. He is like that—he would die of a broken heart, and

leave all his money to charities ! Now let us get a map, and see where you can go and make your—and my—fortune.”

“ At best, I’m such a duffer,” he groaned.

“ Not at all ; you want self-confidence. You can do lots of things perfectly. You can mend a watch, or a bicycle, and doctor dogs.”

“ Oh yes, I can do lots of odds and ends ; I’m what you may call Jack-of-all-trades, and master of none ! ”

“ Nonsense, I consider you most capable ; especially with your hands. Now let us go over the map, and discuss your future field. America—well, they are so very clever over there themselves, no use trying that ! India—no—mother’s uncle was there forty years, and only brought home some elephant tusks ! Australia—too far from *me*. South Africa—the gold and diamond mines, there you are ! ”

And South Africa it was ! For more than two years Jack Truman strove hard to accomplish his task. He saw many different phases of life, and if he had not gained a fortune, he had acquired experience, self-confidence, and a splendid physique. He had, of course, visited the Kimberley mines, been a barman in Johannesburg, and, in the intervals of dire poverty, tutor on a Dutch farm, and driver of an electric tram ; but he resolutely set his face against work on the railway, or in the police, “ steady regular employment open to respectable young men.” No, he wanted no permanent billet, he was looking for a big coup—and the big coup invariably eluded him. For instance, he purchased with all his savings a fine stone from a simple-looking Kaffir boy, and the splendid diamond proved to be pure glass. His next accumulation he gambled and lost ; he caught enteric, and was laid up at Durban for three months. From Durban, he somehow drifted to Zanzibar, from Zanzibar to Suakim, and now despair began to lay hold

of him, for but four months longer remained, and although he had toiled, and striven his utmost, he was no nearer that great prize than when he started. In Suakin he happened to encounter a naval officer—an old schoolfellow—to whom he imparted his story, and who listened with open-mouthed interest.

"Sounds like an Arabian Night's tale!" he exclaimed, "but I say, old chap, I believe I could put you on to a good thing. If it comes off—I'll be your best man."

"You will be the best man I've ever met, if you put me on to that good job. I don't care what it is."

"Then listen. I know you don't mind roughing it, and have got a level head, are a fair shot with a revolver, and don't drink."

"No; get along, Bobby."

"You may have heard of the wreck of the *Mangalore* passenger steamer in the Red Sea?"

"Not I."

"It only happened a month ago. She was bound from Marseilles to Singapore, and ran on something about seventy miles below here—and lies a total wreck."

Jack nodded his head.

"She was a fine boat, eight thousand tons, carried three hundred passengers, and was heavily insured at Lloyd's. The insurance is not paid yet; the underwriters want a few more particulars before they hand over £200,000—you see, it is a fairly stiff sum! She lies five miles off the coast, well away from the steamer track, and was out of her course. The captain talks of fog, and currents—and everyone knows the Red Sea is the very devil! I believe the rocks *grow*! The office people here, I happen to know, are looking for a trustworthy chap to carry on for a few weeks, whilst things are straightened out a bit; a man to keep off the Arab cut-throats, and have an eye to every-

thing till she is formally taken over: you see, there is a lot of stores and liquor on board. They want a steady level-headed *gentleman*, who can turn his hand to most things, from a boat to a windlass; he is not picked up easily on this coast! Now, suppose you lend a hand, and go in for the berth; they will send you down in the steam-launch with a couple of Lascars, and pay you handsomely. I believe there is money in it besides—perhaps a big haul."

"And that's just what I am in search of, these two years, so I'm your man," announced Jack with emphasis.

"Mind you, it is not a kid-glove job; you run a good many risks, both from the Arabs, and others."

"I don't mind that; nothing venture, nothing have. Can you give me a hint of the whereabouts of the coin?"

"No—not exactly; it would be libellous. However, unless you are a regular thickhead, you will soon see how the land lies, and if you do find out anything strange, communicate with Suakim at once."

"And if I find nothing but stale stores, and rats?"

"You must risk that, and take your chance; it is just a bit of a gamble, but mind you, I've given you what you are hunting for all over the place, and that is, a straight tip."

Three days later found Jack Truman *en route* to the *Mangalore*; he had received information and orders from headquarters, was to await full instructions from London, and to keep watch over the wreck—for possibly four weeks, or longer. The new commander was despatched to his berth in a little steam-launch, accompanied by two Lascars, and had provided himself with plenty of tobacco, a Martini rifle, revolver, screwdriver, pincers, matches, and a change of clothes. After some hours' steady steaming, the *Mangalore* came into sight. She lay over

at an angle of thirty degrees, with her decks awash, and sleepy seas breaking over them.

Her position was undoubtedly precarious, and she was anything but an inviting abode—in short, she was a water-logged wreck. Far away from the *Mangalore* lay the African coast, with a fringe of jagged hills behind which the crimson sun was setting; prominent among the hills, was one almost like a tower, but no tower—or even hut—was on that desolate shore.

When the two Lascars had come aboard, and beheld the condition of the *Mangalore*, they loudly refused to remain. She would go to pieces with the first gale—yes, but not with *them* as her crew; and in spite of every denunciation and expostulation that the captain of the launch could devise—backed up by Truman, with broken Arabic and forcible gestures—the two cowards deserted the ship, and returned to Suakim.

Previous to taking over charge, Jack Truman had gleaned some particulars of the wreck. She had gone aground most unexpectedly, when the passengers were all at lunch; there was no panic, everything had been managed with the utmost pluck and coolness. The weather was calm, and passengers had gone off comfortably in boats, had landed about four o'clock in the afternoon, and been subsequently transported on to Suakim. The level-headed captain carried away his log-book, chronometer, and most of his possessions in the steam-launch, and had been warmly applauded for his courage, and resource.

Jack accepted the desertion of the Lascars with surprising *sangfroid*; he was accustomed to being alone. This, however, was a new kind of solitude—a solitude at sea. He scrambled about the deck, and explored the abandoned steamer from end to end. There was the long saloon, the smashed crockery, the pas-

sengers' cabins, with their clothes and belongings scattered about, precisely as they had abandoned them. He discovered quantities of stores, and quantities of rats, and as the result of a careful inspection, he decided to take up his quarters in the captain's cabin. Here, he made up a bed, and after a light supper, turned in.

In a day or two the caretaker became accustomed to his novel position; he smoked a good deal, he read novels—the property of the late passengers—he sat and stared for hours at the sea, or jagged coast-line, and some distant rocky islands, but he never once saw smoke or sail. His sole companion was the ship's cat, a bony, lean, uncanny looking animal, with the pointed face peculiar to the Eastern feline. Sometimes at night, listening to the wash of the waves, it had seemed to Jack that the grey Grimalkin was not his sole ship-mate, unless his imagination was playing tricks. He seemed to hear a footstep, a heavy and yet a stealthy footstep. The experience was distinctly unpleasant, as he knew perfectly well that there was not a human being but himself within many miles. Jack did not believe in ghosts, and yet when alone, as he was, even a strong man may succumb to superstition. Solitude and silence evoke strange thoughts. He had overhauled the entire ship, and even examined the cargo; to his surprise, it proved to consist of boxes full of scrap-iron; this at once raised his suspicions—scrap-iron, at eighteen shillings a ton, was not worth its carriage all the way to Singapore! Then he made another strange discovery—he was wonderfully agile in getting about, even when he had to crawl and creep; down in the hold were three great holes in the ship's side, caused by dynamite exploded from within! This was astounding. Did it mean that the captain had deliberately scuttled the *Mangalore*? Now if he could

but find a scrap of writing as clue, or a witness ! If he could but prove that the steamer had been purposely cast away, his future was made ! He would inform the underwriters, save them an enormous loss, and possibly secure a generous reward—say £10,000.

With such an incentive, Jack worked ceaselessly. He searched almost day and night, anxious to discover some clue before he was relieved, or the derelict went to pieces, and he was compelled to abandon her, and take to the boat. He believed he might find the desired object in the captain's cabin, and every day he examined it. Every day he turned out the bunk, the drawers, the desk ; he lifted the carpet—but all proved useless.

The cat and the caretaker had become close friends ; she accorded him her society ; twice a day he gave her some tinned milk in a saucer (for himself, he lived on the stores), and she in return showed her gratitude by occasionally bringing him a dead rat. The ship was alive with them ; what they existed on was a mystery ; but they overran the saloon, the lower deck, and swarmed up the rigging. Truman often shot them with his revolver—practice, to keep his eye in !

One hot, airless afternoon he was lying in his bunk trying to sleep, when suddenly he was disturbed by an extraordinary commotion behind the wainscot ; a violent scuffling and scratching. The enterprising cat had evidently got in there, and could not find her way out. He had missed her, the whole day. So that was where she was ! He called, and she began to mew piteously and continuously. Well, there was nothing for it but to break in the panel, which he proceeded to do, with a series of violent kicks. Presently, as a result, the cat crawled forth, looking extremely dusty and dejected, and as she emerged from the woodwork, a little ball of white paper rolled out after her. Jack Truman stooped and picked it up and

examined it curiously. Was it a find? It *was!* He discovered a creased plan of the ship, on which were three crosses in red ink, indicating the exact spot at which the dynamite was placed, and there was also a scrap of a letter evidently addressed to the captain.

“Off coast. Lat. . . . can’t miss it . . . tower rock . . . it daytime . . . wire as arrang . . .”

So there was his fortune at last, thanks to the cat! he had found the clue, and the whole thread was complete! For some time he sat on the side of his bunk, with the paper still in his hand, revelling in an ecstasy of exaltation. The two morsels of dusty paper might bring him Nancy. What should he set about first? He must be cool, and collected, and not act hastily. It was full moon, and the sea was smooth as oil; after sundown he would get the boat, row ashore, and walk during the night to a little station thirty miles up the coast, and from there despatch a runner, or a camel man, to Suakim. Meanwhile he would be compelled to leave the cat in temporary charge of the *Man-galore!*

Talking of full moon, what was this enormous shadow on the sky-light? He looked up, and was confronted by a pair of watery grey eyes, and a large crimson face. In another moment the face was thrust into the cabin and a tall bare-footed man in blue shirt and trousers said hoarsely:

“Hullo, boss, so you have found something!” and he grinned, and pointed to the paper, and the broken boards. “I’ve had my eye on you! I always guessed this was a put-up job, and a mighty neat one too.”

“Who the devil are you?” demanded Jack, sliding off the bunk, and rising to his feet.

“Your gen’leman companion,” folding his bare arms. “I am Joe Todd—one of the crew; I was a

bit 'on' when she struck, and in my berth; the boats forgot me in the scramble. I declare, when I woke, and found what had happened, I thought I was dreaming; however, I have been pretty comfortable—the best of liquor free, and I have not wasted my opportunities—a bottle of French brandy and a couple of fizz a day, eh? What beats me is having no baccy. The smell of yours drove me nigh crazy! So here I am—and in the nick of time!"

"Why did you not show before? Where do you stow yourself?"

"Aye, that's telling! I suppose you're in charge of the liquor—eh? The old Hooker has some of the best; I would have lain doggo still, but for the baccy—it drew me out, that pipe of yours. What's this?" suddenly making a snatch at the papers.

"Only a plan of the ship," replied Truman, keeping his fury under control.

"Aye, and the three marks are where she is sunk. Oh, I have been poking round too. I say, boss, this will be a plum for the insurance people! You and I, go shares!"

"No you don't!" cried Jack, making a dash to recapture his prize, but the other was too quick for him; and now began within the limited space of that small cabin a most desperate struggle between the two men. Round and round, and up and down, and to and fro they wrestled.—The cat, in alarm, took refuge in a little rack.—Jack was as hard as an open-air life, youth, temperance, and exercise could make him. The sailor's was a bigger, heavier, more powerful frame—and he was half mad with brandy.

The chances were five to one that Jack would tire down his opponent, when his foot slipped, and he fell on the back of his head, with the sailor a-top of him.

The fall stunned him, and when he came to his senses he was lying on the floor, the contents of the

cabin were scattered in all directions, and it was empty. He lay for some time endeavouring to rearrange his ideas. He recalled the sailor, the struggle, and the fact that he had gone off with the clue in his possession. He rose, and with difficulty staggered to the door; it was locked on the outside.

Jack's frenzy at having the cup of attainment snatched from his lips, his bitter disappointment, and his bad fall, combined to throw him into a fever. He lay half delirious all that night; with morning, he recovered, rose, and endeavoured to burst open the door; no use—it was strong and held fast; he could not blow off the lock, for his revolver was in the saloon. Parched with thirst, he emptied the water jug, which he had luckily replenished at nightfall. The sympathetic cat crept into the port-hole; later she returned bringing him a rat. A horrible idea came to him. Was it possible that he might yet be compelled to exist upon the cat's bounty? No, no—he had not come to that; but by the second afternoon—after thirty-six hours' imprisonment—he was nearly mad with hunger and thirst—especially thirst.

The moon rose; he stood with his face to the port-hole endeavouring to catch a breath of air, yet what was the good of prolonging the agony, since die he must? Hours passed, and then, as he stood, he seemed to hear a distant sound, not the lazy splash of the water, or the boisterous singing of the drunkard, but a far-away humming and throbbing—it was the steam-launch!

Yes, nearer and nearer it approached. His heart beat as if it would choke him. He trembled so violently, he could hardly stand. Now he could hear voices, and he shouted with all his remaining strength. After what seemed a whole week of waiting, he heard steps coming down the companion; the door was flung open, he was free. Here were two or

three officers and officials, who were come to relieve him ; they were amazed indeed to discover Truman locked into a cabin, and looking deathlike, with staring hollow eyes, and parched, cracked lips. What had happened ?

He pointed to his mouth, and whispered 'water.' Water and a stimulant brought him to himself ; in a short time the little crowd was in possession of his story. He indicated the broken panel, and showed them where the precious papers had been concealed.

"Now we will go and find the ruffian," said the principal official ; "we must tackle him quickly, and not let him have a chance to make away with his prize."

The sailor was easily discovered—his resounding snores betrayed him ; he lay extended at full length on a sofa in the saloon, fast asleep, with an empty bottle beside him. His sleep was a stupor so profound that he had not heard the launch arrive, and he never stirred, whilst careful fingers removed two pieces of much damaged paper from his filthy trouser pocket.

Finally, when they roused him unceremoniously, he sat up, stared, and exclaimed, "Bless us if this b'ain't another blooming dream!" Subsequently he admitted that "he had forgotten the other cove ; he had not been, so to say, sober since he saw him, and fought him for a greedy swab—well, it might be a day ago—it might be two or three."

The upshot of the business was, that Jack Truman, the sailor Joe Todd, and the ship's cat were taken off the wreck, and brought to Suakin ; here the papers were examined, and sworn to, telegraph wires put into requisition, and lawyers consulted. The underwriters proved the fraudulent casting-away of the S.S. *Mangalore* (but her clever captain had already made his escape to South America). Subsequently the

wreck was sold to a firm of merchants in Suez, who disposed of her piecemeal. The saloon furniture now embellishes one of the smartest cafés in the town—who sits, may see.

Last, but not least, Jack Truman received a substantial cheque, which he immediately carried home, and laid before Boaz Pottinger, who gave him, according to his promise, £40,000, and the hand of his daughter Nancy.

## VIII

### HELEN, OR SEMIRAMIS?

PROFESSOR JULIAN SERLE never intended to marry, and up to the age of forty-five clung bravely to this resolve. He was a well-known authority on Assyria, had written successful books, read impressive papers, and was precisely at that point in his career when much was expected of him. His mode of life fluctuated between periods of incessant and engrossing labour, and spells of “butterflying” in smart society.

The Professor was well off, and a world-wide traveller. When in London he occupied comfortable chambers in Whitehall Court, and was a member of the Athenæum and other clubs. Returning from Egypt, where he had spent the winter—working on an important book—he, so to speak, fell! Among the crowd of Anglo-Indians on board the steamer which he joined at Port Said, was Miss Helen Thursby, a popular girl among her fellow-passengers, handsome, lively, good-natured, and accomplished. She played accompaniments, amused children,

interested their mothers, and fascinated men, both young and old.

Their charming new acquaintance made no secret of the fact that for the last two years she had been a governess in Simla, and was now returning to England, before joining her only near relative, a married brother in Canada.

The Professor, although hardened by many London seasons, was immensely attracted by the young lady's bright eyes, her sympathetic manner and light-hearted gaiety. Together they played chess and bridge, and together they promenaded the decks, whilst complacent matrons looked on and approved. Julian Serle was a celebrity, a well-bred, good-looking little man, with, it was said, considerable private means.

"It would be a capital match for the girl. Much better for her to marry and settle in London than to rough it on a ranch in Canada."

Ultimately, a moonlit Mediterranean night proved to be the undoing of Julian. As he smoked, and paced the deck alone, he had been meditating on Miss Thursby. What an agreeable companion Helen would be! So intelligent, sensible, charming. He had no near relations, merely a hungry, extravagant nephew, his heir. Why not marry and make himself a home, before he fell into the sere and yellow? Miss Thursby was clever; she would be a stimulating helpmate—one who could type and copy, and was interested in Assyria. Yes! Helen would be his Egeria, and his inspiration.

That same lovely night, leaning over the bulwarks, he spoke; deplored his lonely life, his lack of belongings, and figuratively laid himself and his fortune at his lady's remarkably neat feet.

"I am not," he pleaded, "the usual style of musty fossilised old professor; we will enjoy life together,

and when I am working you can still have your own friends and amusements. And I think I can promise that you shall never be bored."

His lady-love listened to him with shining eyes, and accepted his proposal with joy. Perhaps the little man beside her was not precisely her ideal. Her ideal had been someone in India, who was too poor to marry a penniless girl, and had subsequently taken a well-dowered wife. However, she had completely recovered from that heart attack, and honestly liked her present suitor.

Six weeks after the steamer had docked at Tilbury, the pair were married in London, and subsequently established themselves in a nice roomy flat in South Kensington.

All their friends crowded to call. The bride, though poor, was well connected, the bridegroom a popular celebrity, and the newly-married couple lived in a perpetual round of dinners and social entertainment. Serle had a large circle of distinguished contemporaries: philosophers, men of letters, and men of affairs.

This agreeable condition continued for months. Helen Serle was so hospitable and attractive that visitors invaded the flat from morning to night. She was invited to theatres, concerts, lectures, and dances, yet never neglected her home or husband, but wrote and typed industriously—that is to say, when Julian had a working fit—and found ample leisure for music, theatres, and other pleasures.

The Professor had at first joined *con amore* in the social whirl—he was a man who did nothing by halves. Lately he had been seized by a feverish inspiration, and was engrossed in a book, "The Life of Semiramis," on which he had worked fitfully for years, in the hope that it would be his *magnus opus*. Resolved to secure leisure, he turned his back upon

London, let the flat for six months, and retired to Brighton. But here his fate was no better! Helen had such a faculty for picking up acquaintances and coming across friends, that his precious time was broken into for hours and days and weeks!

From Brighton he fled to the Athens of the North. Here, alas, matters were worse, for literary society fell upon the author, so to speak, as one man! Dinners, from which he could not absent himself, were given in his honour. He was invited to read papers, and to lecture on his most notable subjects—"Sardinapolis," and "Alexander the Great in Assyria."

In short, his work was absolutely at a standstill. Summer was coming, but "The Life of Semiramis," and her reign of forty-two years, was not advancing to any appreciable degree. Strong measures were his only resource. And in response to an advertisement, he secured a temporary home in a far-distant village in the south of England. It was off a main line, and buried in the country. Servants, dog, poultry, and pony were included with a most delightful furnished cottage. Helen Serle was enchanted. Edinburgh was a little bit too literary for her; she enjoyed the change from the thunder of trams in Princess Street to the cooing of pigeons in the woods, and fell in love at first sight with the cottage, the garden, and the village. Alas, in a place whose name he had never heard till he had rented "Meadow-sweet," the Professor encountered an acquaintance—Canon Simpson, an old college friend, who happened to be staying at the Rectory.

"I say, fancy seeing *you* here, Serle!" he exclaimed, as he held out an eager hand. "I caught sight of you in church; and when I told the Rector who you were, he was most frightfully excited. He and his wife hope to see a lot of you. You know he

has been to the Holy Land, and to Nineveh. Every-one for miles round is coming to call on Mrs. Serle."

For the moment Mrs. Serle's husband felt paralysed and speechless. Like the dove from the ark, would he never find a place for the sole of his foot? When he thought of his book, his notes, his elaborate bits of description, all clamouring to be copied out, and polished up, he was struck with a brain storm. "Desperate ills require desperate remedies." If the whole country was threatening to call, and the cot-tage was to be overrun with visitors, there were precisely two alternatives: one to return to Meadow-sweet, and begin to pack—the other . . . and the other he seized on. Clenching his hand on his stick, with his guilty eyes fastened on the ground, he jerked out :

"Er—ah! Strictly between ourselves, my dear old fellow, we don't want any visitors; or rather visitors—er—are not likely to want *us*! The lady who is staying with me is—" Here the colour mounted to his hair. "Well, I need say no more." And with a shrug of his shoulders, the celebrity turned away.

To do his conscience justice, Julian Serle felt miserably hot and uncomfortable, as he faced towards home; he had insinuated a most terrible lie—but there was nothing else for it! He would allow the neighbours to suppose that Helen was his mistress—since no other defence would secure complete privacy and isolation. After all, what did it matter in this God-forsaken part of the world, where they did not know a soul? And it was only for three months. Then Helen could return home, meet all her old friends, and as many new ones as she liked!

At first Mrs. Serle was supremely indifferent to the lack of callers. In fact, she never gave them a thought. The pony and trap, the dog, the garden and the poultry, kept her delightfully engaged. She

had a weekly box from Mudie's, some interesting embroidery, plenty of correspondence, and half a dozen new songs. After two or three weeks these pleasures began to pall, and she realised the want of a companion of her own sex, with whom to discuss new stitches, new novels, and new songs. Julian, plunged in the records of Semiramis and her times, and surrounded by stacks of musty old books, had no thought for anything but his absorbing work, and—as an occasional relaxation—a little trout-fishing.

But, once Helen had seen to the housekeeping, the flowers, and accomplished a certain amount of typing, her hours were her own, and proved both empty and solitary. As she walked out with the dog, or drove "Fat Tom," the bay pony, she noticed that the neighbourhood was well populated. Within half a mile were two large places, whose gates delivered and received motors. There were also various country houses, where she caught sight of green lawns, and gatherings of active white-clad figures, playing tennis. Helen Serle loved tennis, and was quite a notable performer.

Strange that not a soul had come to look them up. And yet they had been at Beckwell a whole month. The villagers, too, seemed funny people. Their manners were surly, their answers brief to rudeness. And how they stared! (Perhaps her rather daring French hats and very smart high-heeled shoes lent some colour to her husband's lie.) Mrs. Serle was not unaccustomed to being looked at, nor did she disdain a certain amount of respectful admiration, but in the expression of these people's eyes lay curiosity, aversion, and contempt. The servants of the cottage—two well-trained maids and a gardener-groom—had, at first, been civil and satisfactory. Now they were off-hand and almost insolent; and yet she treated them well, and gave little trouble. Indeed, she

dusted the drawing-room and did the lamps herself, partly to fill up her time. Nevertheless, the cook scowled, Annie flounced and slammed doors, and once she had been overpowered by a suspicion that the groom-gardener had winked at her! She turned and confronted him with a flaming face—and he had never repeated this enormity.

Latterly Annie had been openly impertinent, and one day when her mistress asked her what she meant by saying, "Good enough for *you*!" with arms akimbo, she replied, "Oh, you know what I mean well enough, and only for Miss Mills and me bein' with her so long, and my promisin' I'd do my best, I'd have been out of this the very day you come in. Up to now I've always lived with respectable people, and I've got my own character to think of. And Jim—that's my young man—says he don't half like it!"

"What do you mean?" cried Helen, white with anger. "I insist on knowing!"

But Annie merely turned her back, and began to arrange the ornaments on the chimneypiece.

"Answer me, Annie."

"What's the good of telling you what you *know*?" said Annie over her shoulder.

"You cannot remain here!" said her mistress breathlessly. "You must leave at once. Go now and pack your things."

"Only too glad to be out of it," was Annie's retort, as with a toss of her head she tramped from the room.

Julian Serle was deep in meditation over the particular neat insertion of a "purple patch," when his wife burst in upon him in a condition of extraordinary excitement.

"Oh, Julian, what do you think! That girl Ann has been most outrageously insolent. I found her just now trying on my best hat; and when I remon-

strated, she said the most awful things—insinuating—I can't tell you what. I think she must be crazy, for I'm sure she doesn't drink. Anyhow, she shall depart within the hour. So please give me one pound, thirteen shillings, and four pence."

"Oh, nonsense!" he exclaimed. "Why mind her, Nell? It's only her ignorance. The mental calibre of these rustics is abnormally low."

"No, no, it's *not* her ignorance!" retorted his wife. "On the contrary, Annie implies that she knows a great deal on some subject about *us*—but what it is she refuses to divulge."

"But, my dear, how will you manage without her?"

"Oh, I'll get in the laundress's sister. I hear she's been in service. Sooner than keep Annie, I would do the work myself."

That afternoon Annie departed. As she bounced into the room to receive her wages, she said with a touch of sarcasm :

"I'll not trouble you for a character. A character from this house would be no use to me—and only stand in my way. I hear you are getting Maggie King as parlourmaid—and when she comes there will be a pair of you!"

Then, seizing the one pound, thirteen shillings, and fourpence, she swept out, to where a ruddy-faced young man was waiting to carry her box. He accorded Mrs. Serle a sort of up-and-down glare, and was presumably the "Jim, who didn't half like it!"

After this little domestic storm, things subsided at the cottage. Maggie King proved humble and amenable, but her mistress noticed that she and the cook were barely on speaking terms—and that Maggie took her meals alone in the pantry.

One evening, as they sat in the garden after dinner, Helen said to her husband :

" Julian, don't you think it very odd that not a soul has called ? "

" Well, no, my dear ; the fact is—they know who I am, and that I'm desperately busy, and only here for absolute peace and seclusion. They understand how hard I am working."

" Yes, of course, that's all right. But what about me ? I'm not clamouring for a rush of callers, or chatterers ; but tea in the garden, and a game of tennis, or even a walk with another woman would not disturb you. Do you know that I've not spoken to one of my sex for eight weeks ? I really don't want to grumble, dear—but it's rather dreary for me. And I cannot understand why not even the parson's wife has called—though I'm a regular attendant at church. I expect they've had an infectious disease in this house—and that not very long ago. The neighbours are afraid to come near us. What is your idea ? "

" Um ! Um ! "—taking his cheroot out of his mouth and looking at it thoughtfully. " Maybe so. There may be something in what you say."

Then he suddenly picked up the *Spectator*, and she resumed her embroidery with a sigh. After a few moments' dead silence the author raised his eyes cautiously over the paper, and gravely surveyed his wife. The expression on his face was rather anxious and doubtful. As Helen caught his eye, she said :

" How soon do you think the book will be finished ? " She had actually come to hate the great work ! Solitude, silence, and loneliness had quenched her earlier enthusiasm.

" I am just commencing the last chapter but one."

" Thank goodness ! " she exclaimed with heartfelt satisfaction.

" I'm hoping that this work will definitely decide my position as an authority on Assyrian matters, and rank me with Blair, Usher, and Clinton. If so, my

labours will not have been in vain"; and he smiled with easy assurance.

"But, Julian dear, do you think that it was worth it?"

"Worth what?"

"I mean sacrificing hours, days, and months, to a dusty, sandy old subject—that can only interest a comparatively small public?"

He put down his paper and stared as if he could not believe his ears.

"You miss so much," she continued boldly. "Think of the beautiful summer you have wasted, stuffing indoors, from morning till night; only creeping out now and then to do a little fishing. Think of our friends, that we have scarcely seen for six months. You are sacrificing your best hours and days to the memory of a dead woman—a woman who has been dead nearly four thousand years! Even so, I am most frightfully jealous of her!"

"My dear girl, you're talking the greatest nonsense! I thoroughly appreciate the beauty of the world. As for society, I have you—a host in yourself. If I had not taken determined measures, and buried myself here, this book of mine would *never* have been finished."

"But I thought you were almost at the last chapter?" she protested, with tears in her voice.

"That's true. But the complete work has to be carefully revised—rather a big job! However, when it is ready for the printers, you and I will go off, and have a couple of gay weeks in Paris."

The long, empty days lagged on. Mrs. Serle, as she walked or gardened, felt more and more solitary and depressed. Alas, for the time when she rode high on the crest of popularity! She could not have believed it possible that she would have pined so incessantly for the society of one of her own sex. Was

there something strange about the house they lived in? Was there anything peculiar about herself? Why did people cross the road when they saw her? Why had she a whole pew to herself in church? The situation presented was an extraordinary puzzle! Yet she dared not seek further enlightenment from Julian, for just now he was so immersed in his book that he scarcely snatched his meals. Her enlightenment came from another quarter.

For lack of amusement, it was her custom to drive far afield, the dog seated beside her as sole companion. In a remote country road she happened upon a lady resting on a bank with a bicycle beside her. She was evidently in distress, as she looked ghastly pale, and had taken off a boot.

"Can I help you in any way?" inquired Mrs. Serle, as she pulled up.

For a moment the stranger did not reply. Her pale face became crimson. At last she said:

"I've had a tumble off my bicycle. We went over a loose stone, and I'm afraid I've sprained my ankle. If you can give me a lift back to Beckwell I shall be awfully obliged."

"Yes, with pleasure," said Mrs. Serle. "The pony will stand, and I will get out and help you."

Within five minutes the stranger, her bicycle, and the deposed dog were packed into the cart, and the Good Samaritan drove off.

For a long time her companion confined her conversation to monosyllables. Miss Piggott, the rector's sister-in-law, had no desire to talk to the pretty young woman who shared the Professor's address—but not his name. Strange to say, she was *not* "made up"!

"I suppose you live at Beckwell?" enquired Mrs. Serle.

"Yes, in the red house just as you come into the village."

“It’s a pretty place, but extraordinarily dull. Do you know, I have been here three months, and have not spoken to a soul? I hope you won’t mind my saying that the residents of Beckwell are not very sociable to strangers.”

“No, I suppose we’re not,” murmured the other, who looked self-conscious, and uncomfortable.

“I can’t tell you how I am longing to depart, for I feel as if I should soon grow into a potato! You see, my husband is completely engrossed in his book—working alone all day. As it’s rather an important piece of literature, I never disturb him, and have rather a lonely time. I cannot understand what I have done to be ostracised!”

Mrs. Serle was allowing weeks of accumulated bitterness to find an outlet at last!

“We have come to the conclusion that there must have been smallpox or something in the house, and that is the reason that no one has ever come near us. Perhaps you can tell me if this is the case?”

“No,” replied Miss Piggott, “there has never been a case of smallpox in the village—as far as I know. But I think if you ask Mr. Serle, *he* will explain the reason why you have no visitors.”

“I have asked my husband.”

“Your *husband!*” interrupted the other, “your *husband!*”

“Certainly my husband. What else did you think he was?” And she pulled up the pony, and surveyed her companion with blazing eyes.

“Oh, this is most embarrassing!” bleated Miss Piggott. “That *I* should be called upon to explain matters is too—too—bad!” and her face exhibited bright red patches on its high cheek-bones. Never in a life of fifty years had she found herself in such a desperate situation.

"But please do enlighten me," urged Mrs. Serle. "I shall be so grateful to you if you will."

"Well then—I suppose—I *must!* A few days after you arrived here, Canon Simpson met Mr. Seile in the village. It seems they were old college friends, and when the Canon told your—er—husband, that we were all so pleased to have him amongst us, and were hoping to make your acquaintance, he gave the Canon to understand that—you were—er—not his *wife!*"

"What?" cried Mrs. Serle, and her voice was so loud and shrill that it startled the dog and pony.

"At any rate, that is what he *implied*, and wished to imply!"

"But I am his wife! We were married at St. Mary Abbotts, Kensington, a year ago; and there were nearly three hundred people at our wedding."

"Then what did he *mean?*"

"I think I can explain," she said, suddenly whipping up Fat Tom. "He wanted absolute solitude and leisure in order to finish his book. We left our flat in London for Brighton; but there we seemed to have as many friends as ever—people, especially my women pals, running in and out all day. We went to Edinburgh, and there the literary world lionised him. At last, when in despair, he saw an advertisement of Beckwell, and we moved here. When Canon Simpson accosted him, and told him that all the neighbourhood was coming to call, I expect he felt desperate, and just closed the door with my good name! Oh yes, I see everything so plainly now. Why people look over my head, and cross the street! Why Annie was insolent. Why I was not invited to help at the bazaar; and why young men kiss their hands to me! I understand why my husband was anxious to turn the conversation when I complained of being dull; and was so full of excuses for the

neighbours. He holds my reputation at a lower price than his book. Well—we shall see about that!"

"I think he has behaved disgracefully, in a most shocking manner," burst out her companion, "and I'm not at all surprised that you are upset."

"Upset!" repeated the other, "with an hysterical laugh. "I shall not be as much 'upset' as Julian, when we have squared up accounts.

"Well, here we are. I think this is your house." She drew up as she spoke, helped the lady to descend, and lifted out the bicycle. "I am immensely obliged to you," she said, cutting short the other's voluble thanks; "if I have given you a lift—you have opened my eyes."

Then, without another word, she got into the cart and drove away.

All that evening Helen was strangely white and silent; she complained of having a violent headache, and soon retired.

The Professor, unaware of the Sword of Damocles that was suspended above his head, started early next morning for London, in order to have an interview with his publisher. When he returned it was nine o'clock at night, and an appetising little supper awaited him. As soon as it was concluded he withdrew as usual into the study. The fire was out. The grate was full of ashes and scraps of paper—it looked as if a large bundle of manuscripts had recently been burnt!

"Hullo, Nellie," he called to her. "Someone has been having a bonfire in here!"

She entered, closed the door carefully behind her, and set her back against it. "Who do you think? What do you suppose it is that has been burnt?" she asked. Her face looked rigid and strained as she confronted him. "Yesterday I discovered why no

one came near me. Julian, you have been guilty of the basest and most dishonourable conduct. In order to enjoy complete isolation, I have been humiliated before the world, my reputation has been sacrificed to the book. My good name has counted as nothing, in comparison with Semiramis!" She put her hand to her throat, and swallowed. "I shall send a copy of our marriage certificate to the parson, and request him to publish the truth."

"So this is your revenge!" cried the Professor, who was trembling from head to foot. "For what was a mere ruse, to keep people at bay, and prevent tribes of women swarming in and out all day long, and disturbing me with their damned giggling, and shrill, high voices. Another wife would have thrown herself heart and soul into her husband's task—instead of being *jealous* of his labour. This book, which you have burnt, meant everything to me. I have had the subject in my mind ever since I was a lad at Oxford. Now it is all gone," and his face quivered with emotion, "my toil, my notes, that I have been collecting for years!" He completely broke down as he added, "It is as if you had murdered my child."

"You should never have married me," she answered, wholly unmoved; "and I will now leave you to replace Semiramis with some other monumental work. I have cabled to my brother, and taken my passage in the Empress line for Quebec. This is good-bye."

"So be it," he groaned, as he sank into a chair, and bowed his head in his hands. "So be it—so be it!"

But matters were not altogether as desperate as the Professor had been led to believe. The day before she left England Mrs. Serle posted to her husband the priceless manuscript that she had merely pre-

tended to destroy, and his relief and joy were naturally beyond description.

Before Julian Serle abandoned Beckwell—which he did almost immediately—in figurative sackcloth and ashes, he went and confessed himself to the parson, and received the severe admonition which he most undoubtedly deserved. Subsequently the guilty man returned to his flat in London—to a home which was empty, not to say desolate. He was miserably unhappy, and missed his wife at every turn; her friends, yes, and his own, were full of insistent and embarrassing enquiries, to which he replied with a very halting tale about Helen having received a sudden and imperative summons to Montreal. Her absence weighed upon him heavily; after all, a live Helen was ten times more to him than a long-defunct Semiramis! So leaving his precious book to see itself through the press, he took ship for Canada, where he sought out his outraged consort, abased himself appropriately—and received a full pardon.

## IX

### THE RED BUNGALOW

IT is a considerable time since my husband's regiment ("The Snapshots") was stationed in Kulu, yet it seems as if it were but yesterday, when I look back on the days we spent in India. As I sit by the fire, in the sunny corner of the garden, sometimes when my eyes are dim with reading I close them upon the outer world, and see, with vivid distinctness, events which happened years ago. Among various mental

pictures, there is not one which stands forth with the same weird and lurid effect as the episode of "The Red Bungalow."

Robert was commanding his regiment, and we were established in a pretty spacious house at Kulu, and liked the station. It was a little off the beaten track, healthy and sociable. Memories of John Company and traces of ancient Empires still clung to the neighbourhood. Pig-sticking and rose-growing, Badminton and polo, helped the residents of the place to dispose of the long, long Indian day—never too long for me!

One morning I experienced an agreeable surprise, when, in reading the Gazette, I saw that my cousin, Tom Fellowes, had been appointed Quartermaster-General of the district, and was to take up the billet at once.

Tom had a wife and two dear little children (our nursery was empty), and as soon as I had put down the paper I wired to Netta to congratulate and beg them to come to us immediately. Indian moves are rapid. Within a week our small party had increased to six, Tom, Netta, little Guy, aged four, and Baba, a dark-eyed coquette of nearly two. They also brought with them an invaluable ayah—a Madrassi. She spoke English with a pretty foreign accent, and was entirely devoted to the children.

Netta was a slight young woman with brilliant eyes, jet black hair, and a firm mouth. She was lively, clever, and a capital helpmate for an army man, with marvellous energy, and enviable taste.

Tom, an easy-going individual in private life, as a red-hot soldier. All financial and domestic affairs were left in the hands of his wife, and she managed him and them with conspicuous success.

Before Netta had been with us three days he

began, in spite of my protestations, to clamour about "getting a house."

"Why, you have only just arrived," I remonstrated. "You are not even half unpacked. Wait here a few weeks, and make acquaintance with the place and people. It is such a pleasure to me to have you and the children."

"You spoil them—especially Guy!" she answered with a laugh. "The sooner they are removed the better, and, seriously, I want to settle in. I am longing to do up my new house, and make it pretty, and have a garden—a humble imitation of yours—a Badminton court, and a couple of ponies. I'm like a child looking forward to a new toy, for, cooped up in Fort William in Calcutta, I never felt that I had a real home."

"Even so," I answered, "there is plenty of time, and I think you might remain here till after Christmas."

"Christmas!" she screamed. "I shall be having Christmas parties myself, and a tree for the kids; and you, dear Liz, shall come and help me. I want to get into a house next week."

"Then pray don't look to me for any assistance. If you make such a hasty exit the station will think we have quarrelled."

"The station could not be so detestable, and no one could quarrel with *you*, you dear old thing," and as she stooped down and patted my cheek, I realised that she was fully resol'ved to have her own way.

"I have yards and yards of the most lovely cretonne for cushions, and chairs, and curtains," she continued, "brought out from home, and never yet made up. Your Dirzee is bringing me two men tomorrow. When I was out riding this morning, I went to an auction-room—John Mahomed, they call the man—and inspected some sofas and chairs. Do

let us drive there this afternoon on our way to the club, and I also wish to have a look round. I hear that nearly all the good bungalows are occupied."

"Yes, they are," I answered triumphantly. "At present there is not *one* in the place to suit you! I have been running over them with my mind's eye, and either they are near the river, or too small, or—not healthy. After Christmas the Watsons are going home; there will be their bungalow—it is nice and large, and has a capital office, which would suit Tom."

We drove down to John Mahomed's that afternoon, and selected some furniture—Netta exhibiting her usual taste and business capacity. On our way to the club I pointed out several vacant houses, and, among them, the Watsons' charming abode—with its celebrated gardens, beds of brilliant green lucerne, and verandah curtained in yellow roses.

"Oh yes," she admitted, "it is a fine, roomy sort of abode, but I hate a thatched roof—I want one with tiles—red tiles. They make such a nice bit of colour among trees."

"I'm afraid you won't find many tiled roofs in Kulu," I answered; "this will limit you a good deal."

For several mornings, together, we explored bungalows—and I was by no means sorry to find that, in the eyes of Netta, they were all more or less found wanting—too small, too damp, too near the river, too stuffy—and I had made up my mind that the Watsons' residence (despite its thatch) was to be Netta's fate, when one afternoon she hurried in, a little breathless and dusty, and announced, with a wild wave of her sunshade, "I've found it!"

"Where? Do you mean a house?" I exclaimed.

"Yes. What moles we've been! At the back of this, down the next turn, at the cross roads! Most

central and suitable. They call it the Red Bungalow."

"The Red Bungalow," I repeated reflectively. I had never cast a thought to it—what is always before one is frequently unnoticed. Also it had been unoccupied ever since we had come to the station, and as entirely overlooked as if it had no existence! I had a sort of recollection that there was some drawback—it was either too large, or too expensive, or too out of repair.

"It is strange that I never mentioned it," I said. "But it has had no tenant for years."

"Unless I am greatly mistaken, it will have one before long," rejoined Netta, with her most definite air. "It looks as if it were just waiting for us—and had been marked 'reserved.'"

"Then you have been over it?"

"No, I could not get in, the doors are all bolted, and there seems to be no chokedar. I wandered round the verandahs, and took stock of the size and proportions—it stands in an imposing compound. There are the ruins at the back, mixed up with the remains of a garden—old guava trees, lemon trees, a vine, and a well. There is a capital place at one side for two Badminton courts, and I have mentally laid out a rose-garden in front of the portico."

"How quickly your mind travels!"

"Everything *must* travel quickly in these days," she retorted. "We all have to put on the pace. Just as I was leaving, I met a venerable coolie person, who informed me that John Mahomed had the keys, so I despatched him to bring them at once, and promised a rupee for his trouble. Now do, like a good soul, let us have tea, and start off immediately after to inspect my treasure-trove!"

"I can promise you a cup of tea in five minutes," I

replied, "but I am not so certain of your treasure-trove."

"I am. I generally can tell what suits me at first sight. The only thing I am afraid of is the rent. Still, in Tommy's position one must not consider that. He is obliged to live in a suitable style."

"The Watsons' house has often had a staff-tenant. I believe it would answer all your requirements."

"Too near the road, and too near the *General*," she objected, with a gesture of impatience. "Ah, here comes tea at last!"

It came, but before I had time to swallow my second cup, I found myself hustled out of the house by my energetic cousin and *en route* to her wonderful discovery—the Red Bungalow.

We had but a short distance to walk, and, often as I had passed the house, I now gazed at it for the first time with an air of critical interest. In Kulu, for some unexplained reason, this particular bungalow had never counted; it was boycotted—no, that is not the word—*ignored*, as if, like some undesirable character, it had no place in the station's thoughts. Nevertheless, its position was sufficiently prominent—it stood at a point where four ways met. Two gateless entrances opened into different roads, as if determined to obtrude upon public attention. Standing aloof between the approaches was the house—large, red-tiled, and built back in the shape of the letter "T" from an enormous pillared porch, which, with some tall adjacent trees, gave it an air of reserve and dignity.

"The coolie with the keys has not arrived," said Netta, "so I will just take you round and show you its capabilities myself. Here"—as we stumbled over some rough grass—"is where I should make a couple of Badminton courts, and this"—as we came to the back of the bungalow—"is the garden."

Yes, here were old choked-up stone water-channels, the traces of walks, hoary guava and apricot trees, a stone pergola and a dead vine, also a well, with elaborate tracery, and odd, shapeless mounds of ancient masonry. As we stood we faced the back verandah of the house. To our right hand lay tall cork trees, a wide expanse of compound, and the road; to our left, at a distance, more trees, a high wall, and clustered beneath it the servants' quarters, the cookhouse, and a long range of stables.

It was a fine, important-looking residence, although the stables were almost roofless and the garden and compound a wilderness, given over to stray goats and tame lizards.

"Yes, there is only one thing I am afraid of," exclaimed Netta.

"Snakes?" I suggested. "It looks rather snaky."

"No, the rent; and here comes the key at last," and as she spoke a fat young clerk, on a small yellow pony, trotted quickly under the porch—a voluble person, who wore spotless white garments, and spoke English with much fluency.

"I am abject. Please excuse being so tardy. I could not excavate the key; but at last I got it, and now I will hasten to exhibit premises. First of all, I go and open doors and windows, and call in the atmosphere—ladies kindly excuse." Leaving his tame steed on its honour, the baboo hurried to the back, and presently we heard the grinding of locks, banging of shutters, and grating of bolts. Then the door was flung open and we entered, walked (as is usual) straight into the drawing-room, a fine, lofty, half-circular room, twice as large and well-proportioned as mine. The drawing-room led into an equally excellent dining-room. I saw Netta measuring it with her eye, and she said, "One could easily

seat thirty people here, and what a place for a Christmas-tree!"

The dining-room opened into an immense bedroom which gave directly on the back verandah, with a flight of shallow steps leading into the garden.

"The nursery," she whispered; "capital!"

At either side were two other rooms, with bath and dressing-rooms complete. Undoubtedly it was an exceedingly commodious and well-planned house.

As we stood once more in the nursery—all the wide doors being open—we could see directly through the bungalow out into the porch, as the three large apartments were *en suite*.

"A draught right through, you see!" she said.  
"So cool in the hot weather."

Then we returned to the drawing-room, where I noticed that Netta was already arranging the furniture with her mental eye. At last she turned to the baboo and said, "And what is the rent?"

After a moment's palpable hesitation he replied, "Ninety rupees a month. If you take it for some time it will be all put in repair and done up."

"Ninety!" I mentally echoed—and we paid one hundred and forty!

"Does it belong to John Mahomed?" I asked.

"No—to a client."

"Does he live here?"

"No—he lives far away, in another region; we have never seen him."

"How long is it since this was occupied?"

"Oh, a good while—"

"Some years?"

"Perhaps," with a wag of his head.

"Why has it stood empty? Is it unhealthy?" asked Netta.

"Oh no, no. I think it is too majestic, too gigantic for insignificant people. They like something

more altogether and *cosy*; it is not *cosy*—it is suitable to persons like a lady on the General's staff," and he bowed himself to Netta.

I believe she was secretly of his opinion, for already she had assumed the air of the mistress of the house, and said briskly, "Now I wish to see the kitchen, and servants' quarters," and, picking up her dainty skirts, she led the way thither through loose stones and hard yellow grass. As I have a rooted antipathy to dark and uninhabited places, possibly the haunt of snakes and scorpions, I failed to attend her, but, leaving the baboo to continue his duty, turned back into the house alone.

I paced the drawing-room, dining-room, the nursery, and as I stood surveying the long vista of apartments, with the sun pouring into the porch on one hand, and on the green foliage and baked yellow earth of the garden on the other, I confessed to myself that Netta was a miracle!

She, a new arrival, had hit upon this excellent and suitable residence; and a bargain. But, then, she always found bargains; their discovery was her *métier*!

As I stood reflecting thus, gazing absently into the outer glare, a dark and mysterious cloud seemed to fall upon the place, the sun was suddenly obscured, and from the portico came a sharp little gust of wind that gradually increased into a long-drawn wailing cry—surely the cry of some lost soul! What could have put such a hideous idea in my head? But the cry rang in my ears with such piercing distinctness that I felt myself trembling from head to foot; in a second the voice had, as it were, passed forth into the garden and was stifled among the tamarind trees in an agonised wail. I roused myself from a condition of frightful obsession, and endeavoured to summon my common sense and self-command. Here was I, a

middle-aged Scotchwoman, standing in this empty bungalow, clutching my garden umbrella, and imagining horrors!

Such thoughts I must keep exclusively to myself, lest I become the laughing-stock of a station with a keen sense of the ridiculous.

Yes, I was an imaginative old goose, but I walked rather quickly back into the porch, and stepped into the open air, with a secret but invincible prejudice against the Red Bungalow. This antipathy was not shared by Netta, who had returned from her quest all animation and satisfaction.

"The stables require repair, and some of the godowns," she said, "and the whole house must be re-coloured inside, and matted. I will bring my husband round to-morrow morning," she announced, dismissing the baboo. "We will be here at eight o'clock sharp."

By this I knew—and so did the baboo—that the Red Bungalow was let at last!

"Well, what do you think of it?" asked Netta triumphantly, as we were walking home together.

"It is a roomy house," I admitted, "but there is no office for Tom."

"Oh, he has the Brigade Office.—Any more objections?"

"A bungalow so long vacant, so entirely overlooked, must have *something* against it—and it is not the rent—"

"Nor is it unhealthy," she argued. "It is quite high, higher than your bungalow—no water near it, and the trees not too close. I can see that you don't like it. Can you give me a good reason?"

"I really wish I could. No, I do not like it—there is something about it that repels me. You know I'm a Highlander, and am sensitive to impressions."

"My dear Liz," and here she came to a dead halt,

"you don't mean me to suppose that you think it is haunted? Why, this is the twentieth century!"

"I did not say it was haunted"—(I dared not voice my fears)—"but I declare that I do not like it, and I wish you'd wait; wait only a couple of days, and I'll take you to see the Watsons' bungalow—so sunny, so lived in—always so cheerful, with a lovely garden, and an office for Tom."

"I'm not sure that *that* is an advantage!" she exclaimed with a smile. "It is not always agreeable to have a man on the premises for twenty-four hours out of the twenty-four hours!"

"But the Watsons—"

"My dear Liz, if you say another word about the Watsons' bungalow I shall have a bad attack of the sulks, and go straight to bed!"

It is needless to mention that Tom was delighted with the bungalow selected by his ever-clever little wife, and for the next week our own abode was the resort of tailors, hawkers, butchers, milkmen, furniture-makers, ponies and cows on sale, and troops of servants in quest of places.

Every day Netta went over to the house to inspect, and to give directions, to see how the mallees were laying out the garden and Badminton courts, and the matting people and whitewashers were progressing indoors.

Many hands make light work, and within a week the transformation of the Red Bungalow was astonishing. Within a fortnight it was complete; the stables were again occupied—also the new spick-and-span servants' quarters; Badminton courts were ready to be played upon; the verandah and porch were gay with palms and plants and parrots, and the drawing-room was the admiration of all Kulu. Netta introduced plants in pots—pots actually dressed up in pongee silk!—to the station ladies; her sofa cushions

were frilled, she had quantities of pretty pictures and photos, silver knick-knacks, and gay rugs.

But before Netta had had the usual name-board—"Major Fellowes, A.Q.M.G."—attached to the gate piers of the Red Bungalow, there had been some demur and remonstrance. My ayah, an old Madrasi, long in my service, had ventured one day, as she held my hair in her hand, "That new missus never taking the old Red Bungalow?"

"Yes."

"My missus then telling her, *please*, that plenty bad place—oh, so bad! No one living there this many years."

"Why—what is it?"

"I not never knowing, only the one word—*bad*. Oh, my missus! you speak, never letting these pretty little children go there—"

"But other people have lived there, Mary—"

"Never long—so people telling—the house man paint bungalow all so nice—same like now—they make great bargain—so pleased. One day they go away, away, away, never coming back. Please, please," and she stooped and kissed my hand, "speak that master, tell him—*bad* bungalow."

Of course I pooh-poohed the subject to Mary, who actually wept, good kind creature, and as she did my hair had constantly to dry her eyes on her saree.

And, knowing how futile a word to Tom would prove, I once more attacked Netta. I said, "Netta, I'm sure you think I'm an ignorant, superstitious imbecile, but I believe in presentiments. I have a presentiment, dear, about that Bungalow—do give it up to please and, yes, comfort me—"

"What! my beautiful find—the best house in Kulu—my *bargain*?"

"You may find it a dear bargain!"

"Not even to oblige you, dear Liz, can I break off

my agreement, and I have really set my heart on your *bête noire*. I am so, so sorry," and she came over and caressed me.

I wonder if Netta in her secret heart suspected that I, the Colonel's wife, might be a little jealous that the new arrival had secured a far more impressive looking abode than her own, and for this mean reason I endeavoured to persuade her to "move on."

However, her mind must have been entirely disabused of this by a lady on whom we were calling, who said :

"Oh, Mrs. Fellowes, have you got a house yet, or will you wait for the Watsons'? Such a—"

"I am already suited," interrupted Netta. "We have found just the thing—not far from my cousin's, too—a fine, roomy, cheerful place, with a huge compound; we are already making the garden."

"Roomy—large compound; near Mrs. Drummond," she repeated with knitted brow. "No—oh, surely you do not mean the Red Bungalow?"

"Yes, that is its name; I am charmed with it, and so lucky to find it."

"No difficulty in finding it, dear Mrs. Fellowes, but I believe the difficulty is in remaining there."

"Do you mean that it's haunted?" enquired Netta with a rather superior air.

"Something of that sort—the natives call it 'the devil's house.' A terrible tragedy happened there long ago—so long ago that it is forgotten; but you will find it almost impossible to keep servants!"

"You are certainly most discouraging, but I hope some day you will come and dine with us, and see how comfortable we are!"

There was a note of challenge in this invitation, and I could see with the traditional "half-eye" that Mrs. Dodd and Mrs. Fellowes would scarcely be bosom friends.

Nor was this the sole warning.

At the club a very old resident, wife of a Government employé, who had spent twenty years in Kulu, came and seated herself by me one morning with the air of a person who desired to fulfil a disagreeable duty.

"I am afraid you will think me presuming, Mrs. Drummond, but I feel that I *ought* to speak. Do you know that the house your cousin has taken is said to be unlucky? The last people only remained a month, though they got it for next to nothing—a mere song."

"Yes, I've heard of these places, and read of them, too," I replied, "but it generally turns out that someone has an interest in keeping it empty; possibly natives live there."

"Anywhere but there!" she exclaimed. "Not a soul will go near it after night-fall—there is not even the usual chokedar——"

"What is it? What is the tale?"

"Something connected with those old mounds of brickwork, and the well. I think a palace or a temple stood on the spot thousands of years ago, when Kulu was a great native city."

"Do try and dissuade your cousin from going there; she will find her mistake sooner or later. I hope you won't think me very officious, but she is young and happy, and has two such dear children, especially the little boy."

Yes, especially the little boy! I was devoted to Guy—my husband, too. We had bought him a pony and a tiny monkey, and were only too glad to keep him and Baba for a few days when their parents took the great step and moved into the Red Bungalow.

In a short time all was in readiness; the big end room made a delightful nursery; the children had also the run of the back verandah and the garden, and were soon completely and happily at home.

An inhabited house seems so different to the same when it stands silent, with closed doors—afar from the sound of voices and footsteps. I could scarcely recognise Netta's new home. It was the centre of half the station gaieties—Badminton parties twice a week, dinners, “Chotah Hazra” gatherings on the great verandah, and rehearsals for a forthcoming play; the pattering of little feet, servants, horses, cows, goats, dogs, parrots, all contributed their share to the general life and stir. I went over to the Bungalow almost daily: I dined, I breakfasted, I had tea, and I never saw anything but the expected and the commonplace, yet I failed to eradicate my first instinct, my secret apprehension and aversion. Christmas was over, the parties, dinners and teas were among memories of the past; we were well advanced in the month of February, when Netta, the triumphant, breathed her first complaint. The servants—excellent servants, with long and *bonâ fide* characters—arrived, stayed one week, or perhaps two, and then came and said, “Please I go!”

None of them remained in the compound at night, except the horsekeepers and an orderly; they retired to more congenial quarters in an adjoining bazaar, and the maddening part was that they would give no definite name or shape to their fears—they spoke of “It” and a “Thing”—a fearsome object, that dwelt within and around the Bungalow.

The children's ayah, a Madras woman, remained loyal and staunch; she laughed at the Bazaar tales and their reciters; and, as her husband was the cook, Netta was fairly independent of the cowardly crew who nightly fled to the Bazaar.

Suddenly the ayah, the treasure, fell ill of fever—the really virulent fever that occasionally seizes on natives of the country, and seems to lick up their very life. As my servants' quarters were more comfort-

able—and I am something of a nurse—I took the invalid home, and Netta promoted her understudy (a local woman) temporarily into her place. She was a chattering, gay, gaudy creature, that I had never approved, but Netta would not listen to any advice, whether with respect to medicines, servants, or bungalows. Her choice in the latter had undoubtedly turned out well, and she was not a little exultant, and bragged to me that *she* never left it in anyone's power to say, "There—I told you so!"

It was Baba's birthday—she was two—a pretty, healthy child, but for her age backward: beyond "Dadda," "Mamma," and "Ayah," she could not say one word. However, as Tom cynically remarked, "she was bound to make up for it by and by!"

It was twelve o'clock on this very warm morning when I took my umbrella and topee and started off to help Netta with her preparations for the afternoon. The chief feature of the entertainment was to be a bran pie.

I found my cousin hard at work when I arrived. In the verandah a great bath-tub full of bran had been placed on a table, and she was draping the said tub with elegant festoons of pink glazed calico—her implement a hammer and tacks—whilst I burrowed into the bran, and there interred the bodies of dolls and cats and horses, and all manner of pleasant surprises. We were making a dreadful litter, and a considerable noise, when suddenly above the hammering I heard a single sharp cry.

"Listen!" I said.

"Oh, Baba is awake—naughty child—and she will disturb her brother," replied the mother, selecting a fresh tack. "The ayah is there. Don't go."

"But it had such an odd, uncanny sound," I protested.

"Dear old Liz! how nervous you are! Baba's

scream is something between a whistle of an express and a fog-horn. She has abnormal lung power—and to-day she is restless and upset by her birthday—and her teeth. Your fears—”

Then she stopped abruptly, for a loud, frantic shriek, the shriek of extreme mortal terror, now rose high above her voice, and, throwing the hammer from her, Netta fled into the drawing-room, overturning chairs in her route, dashed across the drawing-room, and burst into the nursery, from whence came these most appalling cries. There, huddled together, we discovered the two children on the table which stood in the middle of the apartment. Guy had evidently climbed up by a chair, and dragged his sister along with him. It was a beautiful afternoon, the sun streamed in upon them, and the room, as far as we could see, was empty. Yes, but not empty to the trembling little creatures on the table, for with wide, mad eyes they seemed to follow the motion of a something that was creeping round the room close to the wall, and I noticed that their gaze went up and down, as they accompanied its progress with starting pupils and gasping breaths.

“ Oh ! *what* is it, my darling ? ” cried Netta, seizing Guy, whilst I snatched at Baba.

He stretched himself stiffly in her arms, and, pointing with a trembling finger to a certain spot, gasped, “ Oh, Mummy ! look, look, *look !* ” and with the last word, which was a shriek of horror, he fell into violent convulsions.

But look as we might, we could see nothing, save the bare matting and the bare wall. What frightful object had made itself visible to these innocent children has never been discovered to the present day.

Little Guy, in spite of superhuman efforts to save him, died of brain fever, unintelligible to the last ; the only words we could distinguish among his rav-

ings were, "Look, look, look ! Oh, Mummy ! look, look, look ! " and as for Baba, whatever was seen by her is locked within her lips, for she remains dumb to the present day.

The ayah had nothing to disclose ; she could only beat her head upon the ground and scream, and declare that she had just left the children for a moment to speak to the milkman.

But other servants confessed that the ayah had been gossiping in the cook-house for more than half an hour. The sole living creature that had been with the children when "It" had appeared to them, was Guy's little pet monkey, which was subsequently found under the table quite dead.

At first I was afraid that after the shock of Guy's death poor Netta would lose her reason. Of course they all came to us, that same dreadful afternoon, leaving the birthday feast already spread, the bran pie in the verandah, the music on the piano ; never had there been such a hasty flight, such a domestic earthquake. We endeavoured to keep the mysterious tragedy to ourselves. Little Guy had brain fever ; surely it was natural that relations should be together in their trouble, and I declared that I, being a noted nurse, had bodily carried off the child, who was followed by the whole family.

People talked of "A stroke of the sun," but I believe something of the truth filtered into the Bazaar —where all things are known. Shortly after little Guy's death Netta took Baba home, declaring she would never, never return to India, and Tom applied for and obtained a transfer to another station. He sold off the household furniture, the pretty knick-knacks, the pictures, all that had gone to make Netta's house so attractive, for she could not endure to look on them again. They had been in *that* house. As for the Red Bangalow, it is once more closed, and

silent. The squirrels and hoo-poos share the garden, the stables are given over to scorpions, the house to white ants. On application to John Mahomed, anyone desirous of becoming a tenant will certainly find that it is still to be had for a mere song !

## X

## THE SCARECROW

EDGAR LOVETT, Esq., B.A., Collector of Munser, lounged in a long chair in his verandah, enjoying an excellent cheroot; and as he had but recently despatched a satisfactory day's work and a fairly satisfactory meal, the condition of his mind was serene.

Lovett was a clever, hard-working civilian—to whom the adjective “rising” had been applied; he was thirty years of age, heir to a nice property—and unmarried.

In a fair-haired, grave-eyed style the collector was not ill-looking, strong to hold his own with mankind in club, cricket-field, or cutcherry; but in the society of ladies, he—so to speak—went to pieces, and became pathetically anxious to please—nervous, sensitive, and shy.

The years he had spent in an out-of-the-way district had ill-prepared him for his present position, where, advanced to a large station, he found himself within the circuit of those rays which beat upon an important official, and the object of benevolent interest to ladies both young and old.

Lovett was not alone on the present occasion; the slight lad who was strutting up and down the

verandah, with his hands in his pockets, and a cheroot in his mouth, was his youngest brother, Bobbie, midshipman on H.M.S. *Bobadil*, then on the East Indian station, who had obtained two days' leave ashore, and had run down from Bombay to pay his relation a visit.

Bobby was "a pretty boy" with a pair of mischievous, long-lashed eyes, a fresh complexion, and a crop of curly chestnut hair; he was also a youth with a bold, enterprising character, and a peculiarly active mind.

"I say, old man," he exclaimed, suddenly accosting his elder, "you seem to have done yourself pretty well in this berth! A 1 bungalow—furnished and fitted out first-class, with sofas, cushions, and lampshades—there is even a tea-cosy, and a piano!"

"The last tenant was married," explained Lovett, "and I took over everything, just as it stood, down to the matting."

"Then you have a capital cook, a fine trapper, two polo ponies, lots of shooting in the district, not a debt or care in the world—I wish I were in your shoes."

"By Jove! sometimes I wish you *were*!" was the unexpected rejoinder.

"What do you mean? I thought your luck was dead in when you got this move—an awfully good thing."

"In some ways—too much of a good thing."

"Pray explain this dark saying!"

"Too many women."

Bobby burst into a shout of laughter, and then exclaimed, "I say, you must be hard up for something to grumble at."

"Well, I'm bothered out of my life—and sometimes I think I'll have to marry one of the lot, to keep the others off."

"Come now, Ted! you are not so attractive as all that! One would suppose you were a pot of honey."

I say, you're chaffing!" and the younger Lovett sat down cross-legged on a chair, rested his elbows on the back, and stared at his brother with round, twinkling eyes.

"Chaffing, no! This station is overrun with ladies. The good old days when a white woman was a *rara avis* departed sixty years ago. Even within the last ten, matters have gone from bad to worse—in the way of imported spins. People then had out their relations—now they open their arms to all the world, and take in lodgers—I mean paying guests! Guests, whose one idea is that the great Indian Empire is merely run in order to afford facilities for flirtation and matrimony: and it is not the girls themselves who are the plague—it is the chaperones, and mothers, and aunts.—Oh, bring it up!" he added in Hindustani, as a smart peon, with a brass badge on his belt, salaamed at the foot of the steps, letter in hand.

This letter Lovett tore open, cast his eyes over it, and called out "Salaam," and the messenger, with another profound salutation, resumed his shoes, and clattered out of sight.

"Now here is a sample," said Lovett, holding out the "chit" to Bobby, who made a long arm for it, and presently read aloud :

"MY DEAR MR. LOVETT,

"Mother desires me to write and remind you that you dine with us to-morrow—this time *no excuse* will avail you. I am sorry to say I have again given my tiresome pony a sore back; will you lend me 'Pinkatee'?—my saddle fits her as if it were made for her. I will send over the syce at three o'clock this afternoon. Do not trouble to answer, but say 'Salaam' if you are going to be a *dear*. I do hope I shall see you at the polo.

"Ever yours most sincerely,

"TOTTY A. TOMPKINS."

"I shouldn't call you a dear, but an ass!" announced Bobby, crumpling up the note. "Why do you lend the animal?"

"Because it is less trouble in the long run——"

"But riding a man's pony is almost the same as announcing that you are 'walking out.' "

"They all ride my ponies—so there is safety in a multitude!"

"And who are the multitude?"

"Well, there are Colonel and Mrs. Tompkins—they have two daughters, a niece, and a paying guest. The opium wallah has three daughters; Mrs. Briton, wife of the civil engineer, harbours two friends; the Padre's wife has two nieces; and the wife of the Major is expecting a relation."

"Hullo, what's all this hubbub inside?" enquired Bobby, as the sound of many subdued voices, a scuffling and moving of furniture, came from within.

"Wait and you will see," replied his brother calmly.

In a moment the chick over the drawing-room door was pushed aside, and two bare-legged coolies came grunting forth backwards; then a portion of the piano—finally the whole instrument—emerged; it was carried by six men, who subsequently bore it away out of the compound, headed by a majestic butler in a gigantic turban.

"I have seen," declared Bobby, "and now await information."

"The piano has been borrowed by Mrs. Briton—she is having a musical At Home."

"How often do you lend it?"

"Well, you see, as I don't play or use it myself—like a popular novel, it is almost always 'out.' "

"I say," exclaimed Bobby, "here is someone coming—I'm off," and without further hesitation he bolted into the bungalow, and, from behind the chick,

beheld two ladies drive up in a high dog-cart. They remained talking to the unhappy collector for fully twenty minutes, whilst he stood before them, bare-headed, courteous, resigned.

" You're bringing it all on yourself ! " commented the listener, when they departed. " You are ten times too agreeable. I heard you agreeing to give a picnic, and offering the loan of your ice machine. If they came and *lived* here I would not pity you—you encourage them ! "

" How can a man be rude to women in his own house, you young savage, and how can he refuse things that are asked for point-blank ? "

" They wanted you to invite them in—*twice* they told you they had had no tea."

" I could not well offer them hospitality, when you were lurking behind the chick—could I ? Here comes another chit ! From Mrs. Trotter. Can I spare them my dirzee for a week ?—and will I go over and dine quietly, and bring my brother ?—So they have found *you* out ! "

" Well, I'm not on ! this is the only evening we have—I'm off to-morrow ; and if the lady comes round to fetch you by force, I shall make you fast with the punkah rope."

\* \* \* \* \*

" I now grasp the whole question," announced young Lovett sententiously, as he and his brother dined together, " you are afraid of your life of all these good ladies ; a small station where there were only three or four Europeans has ruined your nerve—and here you say ' yes ' to everything. You cannot say ' no.' All the women know it, and think you so good-natured, so amiable, so—charming—such an acquisition ; they told me so, on the club verandah ;

they nearly mobbed me ! Of course you are the most eligible man in Munser, and you will never leave it a bachelor—alive ! What would you give these kind Mammas to leave you in peace ? ”

“ Anything ! even to the half of my pay ! ”

“ Give me a new sporting rifle, and I’ll do it.”

“ Bobby, don’t be an ass ! ”

“ No, bar all chaff—I don’t mean murder !—but if you will order me an express, I will guarantee to relieve you of every single invitation, and to rid you of ladies’ society for ever and a day ; they won’t come near you ! ”

“ You speak as if you were a species of insecticide.”

“ I shall prove as efficient as the best Keating’s—and deliver you from this plague of women.”

“ When ? ”

“ Ah, that depends !—you must leave me to do it in my own good time, and my own good way—but it shall be *done*. I’ll never forget how Mrs. Tompkins bore down on you to-night like an old three-decker, and boarded you with grappling irons, and how the little fair girl came, and cut you out—to Badminton—from under her heavy guns ; and Mrs. Briton assured me that she takes a motherly interest in you, and that her niece Julia thinks you too fascinating for words. Of course you are too civil by half.”

“ No—in that lies my sole safety. I do my best to be civil to them all—I make no dangerous distinctions, but it is killing work !—like keeping half a dozen balls in the air.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Miss Dacre, the sister of Mrs. Lawrence (wife of a Major in the Buffers), arrived at Munser early in the season. She was a graceful, dark-eyed girl, endowed with an unusual share of vivacity and charm, who gravely assured her sister that she had not travelled to the East in order to be wooed and wed, and that any

attempt to find her a husband would be fruitless, if not disastrous.

"Everyone seems to think that when a girl goes to India she puts herself up in the marriage market!" she declared. "Well, my dear, there is a reserve on me!"

Ida Dacre was fully as quick as Bobby Lovett in grasping the position of the collector, and she (privately) made great fun of the little tin god and his worshippers, and held herself aloof from him, in a manner so remarkable that his interest was awakened. "Here, at least," he said to himself, "is one girl who pointedly avoids me—snubs me—when we do meet, and plainly cannot endure the sight of me! I wonder what I have done, or left undone?"

Miss Dacre had expected the much-sought-after gentleman to be abominably conceited, egotistical and spoiled, but one day, when they were both sheltering in a "tope" from a shower, she was agreeably surprised to discover that his opinion of himself was of the humblest—that he had been at school—and in the same house—with her pet brother, and that he really was not at all bad! She suffered him to ride back with her to the cantonment, and at an early date permitted her sister to invite him to dinner. Miss Dacre was a pretty girl, and an accomplished musician, but she had a mischievous sense of humour and a witty tongue. She teased the little tin god; she flouted him, and repelled him with her jeers, whilst her merry, mocking eyes held him fast. Edgar Lovett became her slave—he was desperately in love, but dared not declare his sentiments, the lady being so perplexingly reserved. Oh, if he only had one ray of hope he would have spoken—but his goddess gave no sign. She rode with him, and quarrelled, and danced, and laughed, and mocked, and argued—and drove the poor fellow distracted.

He had frequently, but vainly, invited Miss Dacre and her sister to come to tea in his bungalow, and to inspect and borrow his books. He promised them a tempting exhibition of all his latest publications: after long demur, a date was positively fixed. Unfortunately, just before this happy event, Lovett was obliged to leave the cantonment for two days' official duty in the district. His business accomplished, he returned to Munser in a fever of anxiety. His train was behind time, and he was desperately afraid that he would arrive too late to receive his honoured and important guests.

Outside the station Lovett looked in vain for his smart dogcart and fast stepper—instead of which he found one of his own peons awaiting him, with a dusty old gharry.

“What is the meaning of this?” he demanded, in imperious Hindustani, “where is the cart?”

“Light of the World,” replied the man, “by your favour, the Missy Sahib hath taken it.”

“Missy—what Miss Sahib?”

“The Missy who has been at your honour's house this two days.”

Lovett sprang into the gharry shouting the word “Chullo!” and was soon swept out of the station, in a cloud of dust.

Ten minutes' galloping brought him to where his own trim yet dignified bungalow stood, in a large compound, within a few yards of the principal high road; and throwing a rupee to the driver, he dashed up the steps, and flung into the drawing-room. No, they had not arrived—the house was empty. It was after six o'clock, and here the bearer appeared—grave-eyed, and with a troubled mien.

“Did two ladies come for tea?” inquired Lovett.

“No, Huzoor, but one lady been here two days; breakfast, tiffin, and dinner.”

“ *What?* ”

“ Yes, she telling me she is the Sahib’s—cousin—same like sister—and come from England.”

“ There must be some mistake,” muttered Lovett, staring at the scattered cushions, the crumpled newspapers, and stumps of cigarettes which littered his usually neat verandah.

“ Here, the Missy now coming ! ” announced the bearer, and he indicated with a tragic finger the dogcart, spanking down the road, in which sat a slim, upright, female form, wearing a jaunty sailor-hat and a gay pink frock. The dogcart rattled into the compound, and up to the steps, and an absolutely strange girl called out to the bewildered Lovett :

“ Hullo, so there you are ! So glad to see you at last ! ”

She threw the reins to the syce, jumped down, and was presently shaking the collector’s limp, reluctant hand.

“ Now come inside,” she said, taking him by the arm, and lifting the chick, “ and I’ll tell you *all* about it—I daresay you are a little bit surprised ? ”

Lovett, dumbfounded, stood speechless, for the moment mentally stunned, staring into the smiling face and bold, saucy eyes of his companion.

A thick curly fringe of yellow hair peeped out beneath the sailor hat; her dress, though merely cotton, was elaborately trimmed, and frilled; round her neck was a huge lace ruffle.

Her manner was but too assured—and she was apparently quite sane.

“ You have heard of the Dales, your cousins ? ” she resumed.

He nodded.

“ Well, they are my cousins *too*. I came out to stay with friends—not far from here—and they have measles, and could not take me in. So I cast about

what to do, and thought of *you*, Teddy Lovett. Everyone knows how good-natured you are, and such a ladies' man—and so here I am, taking you by storm ! By the way, can I have a whisky and soda ? ”

“ Certainly. Boy, *peg loa!* ”

The bearer promptly entered, and the refreshment was presented to the lady, who swallowed half a tumblerful at a gulp.

“ Of course, ” she resumed with a smirk, “ if I were at home I could not billet myself on you like this. But in India, I believe, there are no silly conventions ; the Dales said you were an awfully good sort, and— ”

“ And of course, ” broke in Lovett, “ I am glad to have it in my power to oblige any friend of theirs— ”

“ Cousin, ” corrected the lady.

“ But India is not at all so unconventional as you suppose, Miss—er— ”

“ Ruby Scarlett, ” she supplemented quickly.

“ And so, Miss Scarlett, I will find quarters elsewhere, and leave you the house to yourself—until your friends think it possible to receive you. If you want anything you will hear of me at the Dâk Bungalow—and meanwhile pray make yourself quite at home.”

“ Thanks, awfully—you are really too’ dear and kind for words ! By rights, I should go to the Dâk Bungalow, but I’m a little afraid of the fowl ! I don’t know why, but one always hears that one should give a Dâk Bungalow fowl a wide berth. I suppose they are savage ? ”

“ If you will excuse me, I will go and make some arrangements, ” rejoined Lovett, in a chilly voice, totally ignoring her question ; and with a bow he turned to depart. As he reached the door, his ears were saluted by a shrill whistle. He looked quickly round, and beheld Miss Ruby Scarlett, minus hat and wig—and, grinning above her white ruffle, the impudent face of his brother Bobby !

"Took a jolly good rise out of you, didn't I?" he cried.

"Yes," with an air of relief; "but what in heaven's name is the meaning of this dressing-up, and tomfoolery?"

"Sit down there and have a cheroot, and pull yourself together, old man, and you shall hear. I declare you look—completely shattered!"

"Enough to shatter anyone!" pointing to his brother's costume. "What does it all mean? I'm no good at dumb crambo, or charades."

"It means, dear brother, that I am here as your 'scarecrow.' My office is to keep the birds off—in other words, the ladies, and I have succeeded to a miracle!"

"Good Lord, Bobby, what *have* you been up to?" demanded Lovett, in genuine alarm.

"Well, listen to my little tale"; crossing his legs, and proceeding with an air of easy narration. "I have earned that rifle nobly—as you shall hear."

"Go on," said his brother huskily, "tell me the worst—and get it over."

"The worst?" echoed Bobby. "There is no worst! It's the best joke I've ever known, bar none—a screaming farce."

"We are great at theatricals on the *Bobadil*, quite a floating Haymarket. We had been playing a piece called 'Topsy-Turvy' in which I had a star part, first leading lady, and I yearned to show myself to you—and take you in. So when we got to Bombay this cruise, I put in for a week ashore, collected a box of properties, borrowed the bearer of a chum in the Yacht Club, and persuaded him to bring along his old wife as my ayah. Then we all took the train for Munser. I made up in the carriage—started a man in flannels, stepped out a giddy girl in frills and curls! I declare when the bearer came to the door, and saw

me, he nearly had a fit ! Well, I drove straight up here and I was awfully sold not to find you ; but I sent them all flying about, and ordered tea in the verandah. Presently I went out, and spread myself there, in a sort of blazing scarlet tea-gown—a thing you could see a mile off ! It had the desired effect—it fetched the station ! They rode, and biked, and drove by—all staring, in the rudest and most shameless manner. I kissed my hand to one of the men—he looked like the Padre ; another was for coming in—but I waved him off ! ”

Lovett’s half-stifled groan was unheeded, and possibly unheard.

“ The funniest thing was a landau, packed full of women—an excited old lady and some girls. They went by at a trot, then turned, and came back at a walk ; finally, and lastly, a crawl. I believe they found it impossible to realise *me* ! The old girl put up a big double eyeglass and fixed me with an expression of such ferocity, that in self-defence I snatched a saucer, stuck it in my eye, and gazed back with such killing effect that she collapsed—completely repulsed—and shouted to the coachman, ‘ Full steam ahead ! ’ leaving me with the honours of war ! Then, yesterday, I put on my own togs, and went for a ride in the morning, and called in at the club. There were a few men there, discussing the figure in the collector’s verandah. They were inclined to have it that it was stuffed ! Of course this point of view was fatal to my scheme. So yesterday evening I turned out in the dogcart in a flaring hat and frock, and spanked about the station, and down to the polo, and up to the cricket field—not much sign of a stuffed figure there. Several people accosted me, but I only replied in French. Thanks to our nurse I speak it like a native. I smoked a cigarette, and dashed recklessly about the cantonment—and have, I flatter myself, given them some-

thing to talk about. This afternoon I was feeling rather dull, and was lying on a lounge, reading and half-asleep, and wondering when you would appear, when the bearer entered, and whispered that two Mem Sahibs were in the drawing-room—come to tea ! I pulled myself together, and peeped through a hole in the purdah. There was the Major's wife, and another lady, a tall, dark girl, with a ripping figure, cruising about the room as if the place belonged to her ! She was examining your little family gods, photos, pet ink-bottle, books, and your last new photo just arrived—”

“ Well ? ” demanded his brother breathlessly.

“ Well, I ordered in tea, and hurried off to my bower to titivate—as here I was at close quarters, you see, and had to be careful ! I settled on my wig and hat, lace tie, and bead chains ; I powdered my nose, and put a good bit of colour on my cheeks—for it was now going to be war to the knife ! These women had boldly boarded the ship, and I was determined to scuttle their craft.”

“ Oh, Bobby, you idiot ! you have ruined me ! ”

“ Not a bit of it. Be calm, and listen. When I pranced into the room the two ladies stared as if I were some wild beast. ‘ So pleased to see you,’ I said ; ‘ so sweet and good of you to call on me ! I’ve been feeling a bit chippy all by my little lone.’

“ ‘ We did not know we were to have this pleasure,’ said the dark girl, breathing hard, and white as a sheet—very angry, I could see. ‘ Mr. Lovett invited us over to tea this afternoon and to see his books.’

“ ‘ His books ! ’ I rejoined. ‘ What an imposter ! His only books are woman’s looks ! ’

“ ‘ Indeed,’ she snapped. ‘ Nevertheless, I notice a good many volumes here,’ and she pointed to the shelves that line this room.

“ ‘ Mr. Lovett, I gather, is not at home,’ said Mrs.

Lawrence, speaking for the first time, and looking as stiff as a ramrod.

“‘ Alas, no ! ’ I replied in my most effective theatrical manner.”

Lovett senior had jumped to his feet, and was now pacing the room, whilst Lovett junior, lolling in a long chair, with a cigarette between his fingers, related his experience with unquestionable unction.

“ I went on to say that my name was Ruby Scarlett, that I had come out to ‘ do ’ India, and as I had known Mr. Lovett very, *very* intimately at home, my first visit was naturally to him ; and I was frightfully disappointed to have lost two days of his society—but I was expecting him every moment.

“ ‘ Did he know you were coming to-day ? ’ the dark one asked me point-blank, and her eyes were so piercing I could not bring out a lie, and so I said :

“ ‘ No, I am a pleasant surprise ! Now,’ I added, fumbling for the tea-pot, ‘ let me give you some tea. Mr. Lovett is my cousin, I want to do the honours of his house nicely.’

“ But they would not stay—not a little bit of it ; nothing would induce them to remain, and they were so stiff and fierce they riled me, and I said :

“ ‘ Ah, I see how it is ! Perhaps you’d rather have something else—whisky and soda—and cigarettes. Pray don’t hesitate ; really, I’m not a *bit* prudish.’

“ ‘ No, thank you,’ said the dark one, ‘ I do not smoke—nor do I ever drink whisky and soda. We are immensely obliged to you for so kindly doing the honours of your cousin’s house—we had no conception of the agreeable surprise Mr. Lovett had arranged for us—or that he had such a refined and distinguished visitor ! Good-afternoon.’ And with that, my dear sir, she made me a most elegant bow, and sailed out, followed by her sister ! If ever I saw two women shaking the dust off their feet, as they

left your compound, it was those ladies. I expect they came to borrow your piano, or a pony, or your cook. Well, I flatter myself they won't trouble you again!"

Lovett was now sitting down, with his head between his hands, in an attitude that expressed the most measureless despair!

"Hullo, old boy!" cried his brother, wheeling about, "what's up? What has happened?"

"Everything that could spoil my life has happened," he said, raising his face to his brother's astonished gaze. "You have ruined me! Yes, this is the result of your infernal practical joking, and tomfool craze."

"My what-t? I don't understand," stammered Bobby. "When I was here before, you were nearly crazy with all this plague of women. I thought if I came down, and dressed up a bit, it would be a lark, and—"

"And—?"

"Well, I see I have gone too far, and I'm awfully sorry; but it was such splendid fun—I've never known anything to touch it."

"Play to you, and death to me!"

"Of course I've overdone it. I kept acting, and feeling as if I were on the stage. I forgot my audience. I'm frightfully sorry, old boy; what can I do to make amends?"

"Nothing whatever, the mischief is done—and of all people Mrs. Lawrence and her sister! Their visit was long promised—they have never come before, often as I asked them."

"Then you *wanted* them to come?"

"There is nothing in the world I want so much as for Miss Dacre to come here—and stay for good. She is the only girl in the world for me."

"Oh, my hairy aunt! And I've put my foot in it nicely!"

"She came out since your last trip, and was always very cool and reserved, yet the first day I saw her I knew she was my fate. I'd have spoken long ago, only she never gave me the slightest encouragement. By degrees, I got to know her better. I was invited there, and as a great favour she promised to come here, and choose some books. I looked on this as a hopeful step—a good omen. It was arranged that she and her sister were to come to-day—my beastly train was three hours late. Well, she came, and found *you*, painted, and bragging, and offering cigarettes and whisky! Do you think she will ever speak to me again? She will believe I have insulted her on purpose. You'd better go back to your ship, Bobby; you have done enough mischief to last for some time."

"I must go to-night, anyhow," rejoined Bobby, "my leave is up," and gathering up his hat and wig he scampered out of the room.

Once in his own apartment, Bobby lit another cigarette, and sat down to meditate. His round, merry face looked unusually grave and thoughtful. At last he had made up his mind. He called his bearer, and ordered a gharry. Then he replaced his wig and hat and veil, desiring his servant to pack his effects and leave out his own clothes. Having given these orders, he scrambled into the conveyance, and told the man to drive to Major Lawrence's—"Jeldi!"

\*       \*       \*       \*       \*

As was only to be expected, Miss Dacre and her sister returned from their unpleasant encounter in a condition of high and talkative indignation.

They were seated in the veranah, still discussing their amazing experience, when Miss Dacre, suddenly pointing with a trembling hand, exclaimed:

"Why, I believe the creature is actually coming over here!"

"She is," assented Mrs. Lawrence. "I recognise her pink frock. She is returning our call—like Royalty—within the hour. Fly, fly, Ida, and tell the bearer '*Darwaza-Bund!*'"

But unfortunately Ida was too late—one moment too late. Miss Scarlett had already descended, had hustled up the steps, and screamed out:

"I say, I want to speak to you, Miss Dacre! I wish to see you *alone!*"

Miss Dacre drew herself up; her face and air stiffened.

"Please, please," urged the caller, under her breath; "it is of the greatest importance."

"Oh, very well, come into the dining-room," said the other, with a somewhat ungracious air. What could this fearful person possibly have to say to her—alone! As soon as they had entered the room the visitor began:

"Mr. Lovett has returned. He is raging mad with me. I've made one of my usual awful blunders, and I've come over here post-haste to apologise to *you*."

Miss Dacre, still standing, merely bowed her head like a sea-tossed iceberg.

"I got hold of the wrong end of the stick!" resumed the stranger, "and now I want to explain. You see—I'm Lovett's brother—just dressed up, and, as he says—playing the fool!"

Miss Dacre stared for a moment—then as he tore off his hat and wig, and stood revealed, she suddenly sat down and burst into a scream of hysterical laughter—the laughter of misery relieved.

"Well, I'm awfully glad you are taking it like that!" he said, also seating himself, "and I do hope you and your sister will forgive me."

"But what possessed you to do it?" she gasped out.

"Oh, I'm always doing queer things. I've loved playing jokes ever since I could speak. I act a bit, and as I'm rather short and smooth-faced, in the ship's theatricals I play the young lady. I am quite a star! I've just come ashore from our last cruise, where I made a splendid hit as Miss Ruby Scarlett!"

"But what put it into your head to play the part *here*?" demanded the girl.

"Well, now," drawing his chair six inches nearer, and dropping his voice into a key of easy confidence, "you know my brother Ted, what an awfully soft-hearted, good-natured, unselfish beggar he is? He was always the same, and when I stopped here some months ago I found he was just preyed upon by half the ladies in the station. One wanted his ponies, another his dirzee, a third his piano, and so on—and all desired his company! I declare he could not call his soul his own. He is stiff enough with men—but, with women he is just like a bit of putty. He is afraid of you all—he respects the lot of you! You see, we have no sisters, and he is so chivalrous and humble that you impose upon him! He was having rather a bad time when I came—a chit or a message or a call every ten minutes—and so I offered to rid him of the plague of women—half in joke, half in earnest, you see. Then I was so delighted with myself as Miss Ruby Scarlett, that a brilliant idea struck me. I'd rush down to Munser for a couple of days—take a rise out of him, and scare away his visitors!"

"Yes," assented the lady, and her eyes danced.

"You agree with me it was a temptation! He was away, as you know, and I played, in one respect, to an empty house, but I had ripping fun, and I've scandalised his bearer nearly to death. Well, now Edgar is back. I took him in properly at first. Lord! you

should have seen his face! and heard his frosty welcome! When I discovered myself, at first he was shocked. I'm used to that—that is nothing—but when he heard of your and your sister's call, he was most frightfully cut up. I never saw him so bowled over. He has told me to clear! But before I depart to-night—and I must—leave up—I want to make a clean breast, and apologise to *you*."

"But why more to *me* than to my sister?"

"My dear Miss Dacre, though you ask the question you know the answer. Because Edgar thinks there is no one in all the world like you. I suppose he has not dared to tell you himself, but I tell you—he is a gone coon!" Miss Dacre suddenly became scarlet. "I—I—mean that he loves you with all his heart and soul, and all that sort of thing. He has never cared a snap for any girl before—and never will again—and I've been and gone and ruined his life! Oh, Miss Dacre," suddenly pouncing on her hand, "do give me a little, little scrap of hope to take him—you don't know what a good fellow he is—then he'll forgive me, and I'll cut my cable with such a jolly light heart!"

Ida Dacre stared. This was her first proposal, and it was being made second-hand, by an impudent, curly-haired middy, masquerading in a gaudy cotton frock and mittens.

No, no, the whole thing was too much like a burlesque! Bobby—she had heard of him—was once more imagining himself behind the footlights, and playing a part. She made a violent effort, and dragged away her hand.

"I think your high spirits run away with you, Mr. Lovett," she said stiffly. "I forgive you for your joke—but I really cannot suffer you to take any further liberties. Let me advise you to resume your own identity—and to cut your cable without *delay*."

Bobby flushed to the roots of his rust-coloured hair; he gulped down something in his throat, and said:

"I know quite well that I deserve to be put in irons. I'm thinking of Edgar, and how I've damaged his cause—acted as a first-class, double-armour-plated destroyer. Won't you give me one word—half a word?"

"Certainly not—pray why should I?"

"I will tell you," again seizing her hand. "When you called this afternoon I peeped at you and Mrs. Lawrence through a hole in the purdah."

"Oh, did you, indeed!" she said, becoming as red as a rose. "What a nice gentlemanly thing to do!"

"Yes, I just 'took an observation,' as we say. I saw your sister looking at the books and prints. You came to the writing-table, directly under my eye; there was a pile of Edgar's new photographs on it—just unpacked. They are rather ripping, I'll allow. You took up one and gazed at it, and then—ahem!—when no one was looking you put it to your lips—you know you did—you kissed him!"

Mrs. Lawrence at this moment stood in one of the many doorways, and beheld a red-haired boy in petticoats sitting close to her sister, holding her hand in a tight grip, and speaking with forcible emphasis.

She caught the words, "You kissed him!" and poor Ida's face was scarlet.

The lady paused, dropped the screen quietly, and crept cautiously away, marvelling much at what she had heard and seen.

"Oh, you *odious* boy!" exclaimed Miss Dacre angrily.

"Yes, you may think me as odious as they make 'em, and call me any name you jolly well please, as long as you are nice to Edgar."

"If you ever tell him—" she began in a choked voice, "if you ever—"

"I swear on my solemn word of honour, as an officer in his Majesty's Navy, that I never, never will. Is it Pax?"

"I suppose so—but, remember, I bind myself to nothing."

Bobby stooped, in his best dramatic style, and bowed over her hand—which he released. Then he stood up and looked about for his hat, which he put on, stuffing the wig in his pocket.

"My train goes at seven o'clock," he announced, "and I must be off. Will you give me a bit of a note so that Edgar and I may part friends?"

"I never came across such a boy!" she declared, as she moved to the writing-table.

Bobby watched her as she scribbled a few lines. Miss Ida was uncommonly handsome, and had a lovely little straight nose and long eyelashes. So she was fond of Edgar after all!

"There, will this do?" she asked, holding it out.

"DEAR MR. LOVETT,

"Your brother has just been here, and explained the situation. I have forgiven him, and I hope you will do the same. My sister will be very pleased if you will dine with us this evening, at eight o'clock.

Yours sincerely,

"IDA DACRE."

"Yes," exclaimed Bobby, "that is all right. But, I say—what a cram about your sister!"

"Not at all," coolly responded the lady, putting the note into an envelope, "not at all; she is always pleased to see your brother. Now here is the note. I hope," with an ironical smile, "you have got *all* you want?"

"No, not yet—I want something else."

As she stared at him interrogatively, he suddenly bent forward and kissed her audibly on the cheek, and

before Miss Dacre had recovered from her astonishment at his audacity, Bobby was already in the gharry, waving wildly from the window as he rattled away.

The next time Mr. R. Lovett appeared in Munser, it was to enact the responsible *rôle* of best man—which part he played with the most commendable decorum.

The Lawrence family, and one or two others, were in the secret of “Miss Ruby Scarlett”—but the station, when hard up for a topic, still discourses of the mysterious, mad French lady who invaded the collector’s bungalow, and then disappeared. To Bobby Lovett the whole story was solemnly related by Mrs. Tompkins, and Bobby as solemnly gave it as his opinion that the amazing creature who flashed into the station for two days was a visitant from another world—possibly from the vast deep!

## XI

### THE OLD TOWN HOUSE

ON a certain damp October evening in Dublin, not very long ago, a tall girl of two and twenty stood by Nelson’s pillar, obviously awaiting the arrival of a tram; her threadbare waterproof, and rusty felt hat, hinted at a low exchequer, and were but a mean accompaniment to a pair of splendid grey eyes and a brilliant complexion; in fact, such an attractive and arresting face was not often to be encountered even in a city justly celebrated for its pretty women. Tram after tram arrived, discharged passengers, and departed crammed to the doors, but still the girl’s friend came not.

At last “Patience at the foot of a monument” had

its reward. An active, curly-headed young man sprang from a still-moving Donnybrook car, and hastened to join her with outstretched hands.

"I am most frightfully sofry, Bridge," he began; "could not get off till now—such a heavy day at the Bank. I got your note."

"Oh, it's all right," she answered cheerfully, "I just wanted to have a little talk with you about Granny."

"Yes, so you said," he assented, as they turned out of the crowd, and walked away at a brisk pace in the direction of Rutland Square.

Dennis D'Arcy and Bridget Doyne had known one another all their lives; their people came from the same county, and were distantly connected. The D'Arcys were a military race, and had gained more glory than gold; the Doynes of Castle Doyne, on the contrary, owned a vast estate, and were once renowned for keeping hounds and racehorses, and dispensing the almost princely hospitality of old times. Both the D'Arcys and Doynes had come down in the world by many and painful degrees; their names were almost forgotten, and their places knew them no more. These two were the last representatives of the D'Arcy and Doyne families; one was a bank clerk at a salary of a hundred and twenty pounds a year; the other lived with her grandmother, an old lady of eighty, whose exquisite needlework brought them a little bread and tea, whilst the girl herself gave sixpenny music-lessons in their humble neighbourhood, and read the daily papers to a blind old gentleman, and for her services received three shillings a week.

In spite of their poor circumstances and shabby clothes, the young couple presented a surprisingly contented appearance, as they hurried along through the soft autumn mist. The pair were engaged, and deeply in love with one another; the mere fact of

being together stood for complete, if transitory, happiness.

" You say that Granny wishes to see me most particularly," said D'Arcy; " have you any idea what it's about?—has anything extra happened? "

" Yes, Dennis, to both your questions. We have come to an acute financial crisis—that is not new—and Mr. Eale, the solicitor, has been to call on Gran, and made himself most odious, and disagreeable. He threatens all sorts of things."

" Eale is a 'shark lawyer'—a rich rascal who gets his living by money-lending, taking up shady cases, and grinding the faces of the poor. Granny should not have anything to do with such a rotter—or let him inside her doors."

" I know, and I cannot bear the sight of him," replied Bridget. " As to Granny's door, there is no real door in a tenement house; and he stalks down our passage, raps with his stick, and drops in about once a week. He brought Gran a basket of grapes the other day—we *sold* them! "

" Granny should have flung them at his head, and she would—if she knew as much about him as I do."

" I'm pretty sure she knows something of him now; he came yesterday, and stayed over an hour. I kept away all the time, and after he had gone I found Gran crying. Denis," and she hesitated for a moment, " it's terrible to see an old person cry! Oh, look—here is Mr. Eale coming out of Mountjoy Square!"

" Talk of the devil—so he is! Ah, he funks meeting us. See, he has crossed the road, and is going into one of those houses."

Mr. Eale was a short, thick-set individual of about fifty, with heavy brows and a square jaw; he looked well dressed and prosperous, and walked with a sort of swaggering strut. He glanced over his shoulder as

he waited on the doorstep, and threw the young couple a baleful glare.

\*     \*     \*     \*     \*

Old Mrs. Doyne had known a grave change of fortune; from mistress of a fine country place she had sunk by gradual but irresistible forces to two bare rooms, in what had once been the town house of the Doynes, and here she eked out a precarious livelihood with her wonderfully clever fingers. The slow descent had taken fifty years to accomplish; gradual and almost imperceptible at first; the latter phase a breathless rush. Sophia Doyne was a proud woman, and had taken extraordinary pains to hide her troubles and whereabouts from her few surviving friends, who had a vague impression that "Sophy Doyne and her granddaughter lived somewhere in England," or even that the old lady was already dead!

The family mansion, which was situated in the neighbourhood of Mountjoy Square, had once upon a time been one of the finest houses on the north side. Who would think so, to behold it now! The rusty area railings were bent and broken, the areas littered with old hampers, tin cans, and broken crockery; the hall door stood wide, and half a dozen noisy children were playing hop-scotch in the great flagged vestibule. Beyond this, a pair of double doors had once opened into a smaller hall, but the doors of handsome mahogany were now in America. A great winding staircase with shallow stone steps led up to the drawing-rooms—from which now descended an overpowering odour of bad tobacco, and fried herrings. The walls of both halls and staircase were of stucco, very dirty and discoloured, but an exquisite frieze still survived, and gave an impression of processions of

beautifully modelled classical figures—mostly in a condition of unassuming nudity!

Miss Doyne and her companion did not ascend to the first floor, but turned into a long flagged passage—papered with a hideous stone-grey pattern—out of which opened several rooms. In the first of these, Mrs. Doyne was discovered seated at a large mahogany table which was strewn with skeins of silks and ragged paper patterns. By the light of an old-fashioned lamp, she was busily engaged in embroidering an exquisite tea-cloth in various shades of blue.

As she raised her eyes, when the door opened, it was pitiful to see their faded colour, and red-rimmed lids—the toll of work and tears. A cap of real lace crowned her white hair, and a little knitted shawl was closely drawn round her bent shoulders. The old lady was woefully small and shrunken, but she had delicate features, and, for all her squalid surroundings, a certain air of distinction.

“Oh, Denis,” she exclaimed, “I’m mighty glad to see you. Take off your coat and warm yourself.” Then, looking over her shoulder, “Faith, I forgot; there’s no fire! We are a bit short of coal, and I can’t stand the smell of that oil stove—though it boils a kettle. Biddy, my heart, will you go and get tea, and make us a bit of toast at the end of the passage? That is, as you know,” to D’Arcy, “our kitchen.”

“Shall I lend a hand?”

“No, no, you stay with me, Denis; you’ll only hinder her. Biddy’s a grand maid-of-all-work, since poor Peggy died.”

“Poor Peggy!—she must have been a great age—though she always looked the same, as long as I can remember.”

“That’s only six and twenty years, and Peggy was over ninety; she was active to the last, but her mind

was gone—she could not remember anything, except what happened fifty years ago."

"Yes," agreed Bridget, "and she was always telling us that somewhere or other there was what was called 'a power of money' in this house!"

"A house as bare as a picked bone," said Mrs. Doyne; "but Bridgie, my dear, why are you not getting the tea?"

As soon as she had left the room, the old lady put down her work, and, looking at Denis over her spectacles, said:

"That Eale man has been coming here pretty often lately with one excuse or other."

"So I've heard. What does he want?"

"He wants to marry Bridget."

"What!" shouted D'Arcy.

"Yes, he made me a regular formal offer, sitting there in the same chair just where you are now. He said he could give his wife a fine house out on Lansdowne Road, and a motor—and make me a liberal allowance." She paused.

"And what did *you* say?"

"Nothing. It takes a good deal now to make me laugh, but I laughed till I nearly choked, and couldn't speak; at last I said, 'So this is the reason of your visits, and the presents of grapes.' He nodded quite at his ease. 'Do you know who my granddaughter is?' I asked, and he said:

"'Oh yes, a girl without a second gown to her back, who gives the greengrocer's children lessons for sixpence an hour.'

"'That's true,' I agreed, 'but she is a Doyne of Castle Doyne; her grandfather was High Sheriff of the county.'

"'And her grandmother does her own washing,' he put in, as rude as could be,

"'She does,' I replied, 'and your grandmother

was *her* kitchenmaid; but this sort of talk is foolish. My granddaughter is engaged to Mr. D'Arcy—one of her own class.

“‘ Then she's a mad fool! ’ he roared. He was furious, and, indeed, so was I. There was not a pin to choose between us; he said so many hateful things that at last I told him to go, and never again darken my doors.

“‘ These doors are mine,’ he said, ‘ and it is you who will go—not me. I've, as you know, a mortgage on this old barrack. I've not had a penny interest for two years; it's a case of five hundred pounds, and interest, cash down, within a month, or I turn you into the street, you and your stuck-up lunatic of a granddaughter.’ ”

“‘ Well,’ I answered, ‘ it's the street for *you* to-day,’ and I got up and curtsied him out.”

“ That was all right.”

“ He will pay me back. I saw it in his face. Within four weeks I'll have no home, for where am I to get five hundred pounds? ” and she cast her eyes round the room, which was not large, but lofty, well-proportioned, and furnished with a few chairs, a decrepit side-board, and black horsehair sofa.

“ I stripped the house soon after we came here six years ago. I sold every mortal thing I could sell, to a dealer, I was so hard-set for ready money. The mahogany doors in the hall, dining-room, and upstairs, the two beautiful marble chimney-pieces in the drawing-room, the door-plates, and the French mirrors let into the walls between the windows; the whole place was terribly hacked and knocked about. Now there is nothing left; I've come to the end of everything, my dear boy. You know our circumstances just as well as I do myself—how my husband's grandfather lived like a king, and got his wine and his furniture from France, and drove four horses. He

was an attaché in Paris as a young man, and spoke French like a native. The next Doyne fell on worse times, and his mother Madame lived here in shameless extravagance and debt. After she died, the furniture was sold and the house let, till the north side went down, and this, and many another fine mansion, were left to rats and ruin."

"Yes, that's true, and more's the pity."

"When I was a bride at Castle Doyne I had my carriage, and a houseful of servants, but we found debts, and mortgages, and heavy jointures, small rents, and bad times; it was all we could do to educate Bridget's father, and get him into the Army. He went to India, and then he married a girl without a penny, and they died and left me the child—and here I am, an old blind pauper."

"For goodness' sake stop your eternal needle," said the young man suddenly. "Do give your poor eyes a rest. I can't bear to see you sewing so hard, and always sewing."

"There will soon be an end," she replied, spreading out the embroidered border. "This is my last piece; and here is what I'm coming to, and why I want to talk to you privately. You told me you had a good chance of a post, as cashier in an Indian bank; they would pay your passage out, and give a much better salary?"

He nodded.

"Well, Denis, you must accept, and marry Bridget, and take her away with you. She's a clever manager, and will make one rupee go as far as two. You are both young, and have, I hope, many happy years before you."

"And what about you?"

The old lady suddenly laid down her work, and, leaning over the table, whispered:

“Don’t be horrified—I shall go into the North Dublin Union.”

“Never! never! never!” he rejoined, with emphasis.

“Hush—yes, I shall! What does it matter? Who will know? If old Peg was alive it would be different. I dared not have taken her there—she’d feel it. Now *my* feelings are dead. I’m old; my race is run. I’ve outlived my contemporaries, and t’ e only thing I really and truly care for is Bridget’s future—and yours.”

“You don’t suppose we should be happy out in India, knowing we had deserted you, and left you in a poor-house! Come, now—do you?”

“I won’t be a clog—”

Whatever she was about to add was interrupted by the sound of a muffled kick on the door. D’Arcy sprang to open it, and admitted Bridget looking rather flushed, and carrying the tea-things on a battered black tray.

“Oh, such a job to make the kettle boil!” she announced, setting it down. “What have you two been plotting?” and she looked from one to the other.

“Your Granny’s plans,” replied the young man mendaciously. “If she is turned out from here, there are two rooms to let in my diggings in Lower Gardiner Street—cheap, too, and a fine old wreck of a house, next a pawnbroker’s—if you won’t mind that?”

“Not at all—it would be mighty convenient,” rejoined the old lady, with a shrill laugh. “But rooms cost money. Here I’ve been rent free; so have my tenants upstairs; they tell me they cannot pay anything, and are just keeping soul and body together like ourselves—and I have not the heart to evict them.”

"Who are they? They seem a pretty big crowd."

"Well, there's a car-driver in the drawing-rooms; he has six children; above that, there's a charwoman and her paralysed daughter. In the back rooms there's an old sweep.—Eale will make a grand clearance."

"I'm not sure that he can move either you or them," said D'Arcy; "the mortgage must be looked into. I have a friend, a clever young solicitor, and he will examine the whole business; if the worst happens, you come to my diggings. The old woman is a good sort, and will make you comfortable; we will scrape along somehow."

"Oh, Denis, my dear boy, do you think I'd live on you?"

"If only I was not so suspiciously shabby," broke in Bridget, "I'd get a situation as governess. Where I am is all right, as my poor old man is stone blind. If I had even three or four pounds I'd invest it in a sort of personal advertisement, but Granny and I are owed what, to us, is quite a lot of money, and we dare not dun for fear of losing our customers. There's a shop in London that owes me money since last June—I suppose they imagine we work for pleasure?"

"Pleasure!" repeated D'Arcy, and he rose, and, with gentle decision, took the piece of linen out of the old lady's hand.

"Yes, to see your Granny you would think so; she won't leave it—even to have a cup of tea."

"Well, Denis, as you are behind the scenes, I may tell you that I've only three and sixpence in the wide world. I've sold the teaspoons, and my mother-in-law's miniature—she was a beauty, I'll say that for her!—I got three pounds for it in Frederick Street."

"And no doubt it was worth fifty."

"My dear boy, buying is one thing, selling another. The dealer said miniatures were out of

fashion, and a glut in the market—but he took it to oblige me. He was the same fellow who bought the white marble mantlepieces—they came from Florence, and had beautifully sculptured figures—he gave me ten pounds for the pair.”

“ My blind old gentleman takes a surprising interest in this house,” said Bridget; “ he remembers hearing of old Madame Doyne, and her extravagance, burning wax candles, even in the kitchen, and keeping three men-servants, and her china and silver a wonder; also her *debts*.”

“ Which she staved off with sales of the Doyne heirlooms,” said her daughter-in-law, “ though she was always more for buying than selling. She put the finishing stroke to the ruin of the family—for she was a gambler, and loved cards.”

A cup of tea and buttered toast had revived the old lady, and when Bridget carried out the tray she whispered to D’Arcy that she would put *that*—meaning the union—at the back of her mind for a week or two, till she saw how things were shaping; something might turn up.

For the next few days there were further anxious conferences between D’Arcy and his *fiancée*; the mortgage had been examined, and, unfortunately, proved to be in order. This was the news he brought to Bridget, as they stood together in the flagged passage after he had taken leave of her grandmother.

“ When I think of the hundreds of pounds’ worth that have been sold out of this house for a mere song, I feel nearly crazy. I was telling Lynch of those fine marble chimney-pieces; he wishes he had seen them. He knows a good deal about such things, and is mad after old furniture.”

“ There’s nothing left but the house itself,” said Bridget, “ only the bare walls.”

“ And what thickness!” said D’Arcy, striking the

papered passage with his open hand; "as solid as the rock of Cashel! By Jove—no! the wall is hollow. I say, Biddy!"

"What do you say?"

"That I believe there's a door or something here," passing his fingers up and down. "Just feel!"

"There can't be a door," she objected, "for there is no room at the other side."

"Well, there is something. I'll scrape off a bit of the paper and see," and, as he spoke, he produced a pen-knife, and began to make an incision.

"Wood!" he exclaimed. "Bridgie, there's more in this than meets the eye," and he looked at her eagerly; "a door papered up."

"But that's nothing—it's a common thing."

"Maybe so, but I have an idea. I cannot do anything now, it's too late, and the light is bad, but I'll be here to-morrow at eight, and I'll strip this door, if you don't mind?"

"Mind!" she repeated, "as if we did not *sell* doors! But I'm awfully afraid you will have your trouble for nothing. However, I'll make you a cup of tea, and be here to help you."

"Not a word to Granny—yet."

"Oh no, she never gets up till ten o'clock. She can work in bed as well as anywhere—and it saves a fire. Oh, if I could only put an end to her stitch, stitch, stitch; but she *will* do it, and, in spite of her old eyes, her work is exquisite; mine is nothing like so fine—or so saleable!"

By eight o'clock the next morning D'Arcy was hard at work. Bridget damped the paper, which was gradually peeled off, and revealed a door—a locked door.

D'Arcy shook it gently, then violently; the result was a rattling and jingling within, and he exclaimed:

"A cupboard—not a door. I'll run out and borrow a bunch of old keys."

After much humouring and buttering—oil not being obtainable—a key yielded, and a door, which had been closed for eighty years, opened with a reluctant creak.

The first discovery was a thin layer of grey dust, the next a vast collection of silver, glass, and china; the shelves were crowded. Bridget gave a stifled scream, and Denis recognised that they had come upon a wonderful treasure-trove.

"Why, it must be Madame's green Sèvres, that Granny talks about—Louis the Sixteenth gave it to great grandfather Doyne, when he was in Paris; it's worth thousands." And Bridget took Denis by the arm and shook him. "Think of it—*thousands!*"

"Easy, easy, Bridge, or I'll drop a thousand! There seems to be no end of stuff here; that crafty old Madame hid all these valuables before her death, and left no sign."

"Not as far as we know. Now I'll fetch the tray, and we will carry everything into the parlour, and set them out, and then call Granny; she won't believe her poor dear old eyes! "

It took a considerable time to empty the precious cupboard, but at last the whole of its contents were arranged on the round table, the sideboard, and the lesser objects in imposing rows along the floor.

When Mrs. Doyne caught sight of this surpassing display, she stood for some moments stunned and speechless.

"Well, this splendid find of yours, Denis, has come in the nick of time; instead of beggars, we shall all be well-to-do—if not rich!"

"And you shall never take a needle in your hand again, Gran," said the girl, seizing her round the

waist, "and shall have a sable coat, and a motor-car."

"Let us see what there is, before you talk of motor-cars," she said, peering about among the silver and china. "Yes—this is the green Sèvres set; that alone will support us; and here is the old Nankin china, very rare, and a lot of square-marked Worcester," turning it over. There were also half a dozen fine Jacobean wine-glasses, with appropriate mottoes, a quantity of Queen Anne and Georgian silver, a Charles I. goblet, and other articles too numerous to specify—in short, the heirlooms of the Doynes.

For more than an hour the happy trio could do nothing but exclaim, handle, wonder, and admire; several of the treasures had a history which had reached their present owner, and on these she expatiated with eloquence and gesture.

"Now let us be practical," said D'Arcy at last; "I must go to the bank—I'm hours late as it is. I'll get hold of Lynch, and bring him up this afternoon, for I'll ask for a day off; he will tell us what to do, find a valuer, and put most of these valuables on the London market. Meanwhile, leave them just as they are, and let no one see them, or put a foot in this room!"

Capable Mr. Lynch soon put matters in train, and proved an invaluable adviser; he was a long-headed man of business, with a critical and cultivated taste. Ultimately, the contents of the wonderful cupboard brought in a substantial fortune; the Doyne heirlooms were sold, and scattered far afield. Most of the chief prizes, including the Sèvres service, followed the mahogany doors across the Atlantic; the mortgage on the old house was promptly settled; it has been altered into a mansion of flats, for Mrs. Doyne and her family have deserted the north side, and live in a pretty country place, within easy reach of Dublin.

## XII

## THE FIND

IN the luxurious private sitting-room of a well-known family hotel not far from Piccadilly, a broad-shouldered elderly man stood with his hands in his pockets, staring out of the window with an expression of profound boredom. It was a hopelessly wet afternoon and there was not much to see—a taxi discharging two ladies at the hotel entrance, a clumsy mail-van thundering by, and a newspaper boy screaming “All the winners!”

In one respect the individual in the window represented “a winner”; thirty years in Canada had brought him great possessions—whatever he touched seemed to turn into gold. Probably he was the wealthiest guest in the hotel, and yet the most supremely discontented. In spite of his fifty years, his figure was spare and erect, his hair powdered with white was thick and curly; his features were well cut, his face clean-shaven, and he wore a blue serge lounge suit with the air of a man accustomed to employing a first-class tailor.

Such was Leonard Harling, one of the most important and influential residents in his province. Mrs. Harling, a clever looking but faded little matron, was seated on the edge of a Chesterfield, knitting a silk sock. She was a woman who never lounged, was indifferent to outlay and luxury, preferred a bus to a taxi, and wore, when possible, ready-made gowns. On the other hand, her charities ran into amazing figures.

Now and then she raised her eyes, and gazed sympathetically at her companion.

"Poor Lenny," she said to herself, "he is wishing himself back at home, in great big spacious Canada—where life and everything is free, and on a large scale."

Apparently dress offered no snare to this little lady; her green costume was plain and tasteless, she wore no dainty finishing touches, no string of pearls, and her rather ugly hands merely displayed a plain wedding-ring. Mrs. Harling had no flair for spending money on personal adornment, she had been brought up under a strictly economical rule; her husband, on the contrary, was reared in the lap of luxury. Here is his history.

His grandfather, Sir Peregrine Harling, whose tastes were boundlessly selfish and extravagant, had lived for years on family prestige, credit, and pretensions. He maintained and educated the orphan sons of his heir—Humphrey and Leonard. The former, who was brilliantly clever, distinguished himself at Oxford; the latter, who was dull, but shone in games, was still at Harrow, when the sword fell. Sir Peregrine died in a fit of apoplexy—caused, it was said, by an unpleasant letter—and after an imposing funeral, and when he had been laid to rest on his shelf in the great family vault, it was discovered that Sir Peregrine's affairs were in a hopeless condition; the Hall and estates were mortgaged to the chimneys, debts poured in, and creditors—long terrorised by this arrogant magnate—now clamoured for immediate payment.

There was a great and prolonged sale, the contents of the family place, the library, pictures, and plate were scattered over three counties, and a millionaire coal king bought the home of the submerged Harlings. To the widowed Lady Harling there remained an insignificant annuity, and a few small spars from the fatal wreckage. She never rallied from the shock

occasioned by this sudden descent from riches to poverty, but lived long enough to make arrangements for the future of her two grandsons. For clever Humphrey, her favourite, she found an opening on the staff of a Colonial Governor, and gave him the price of her jewels in solid cash. As for good-looking, stupid Leonard, he was packed off to Canada with two hundred pounds, and a letter of introduction in his pocket. To save expense, his passage was taken second-class, in a cheap liner; this proved in the long run to have been a most unwise economy. Leonard Harling, his own master at twenty, king of his company, with a well-lined pocket, and the world as he believed before him, lost his head, and so to speak his senses! He talked loquaciously of his affairs—his outfit, and guns, and money—to hard-headed insidious ruffians who posed as his counsellors and sympathetic friends.

He learnt to play poker and to lose money like a gentleman. Here he was cautious, and did not exceed twenty pounds. At Montreal his companions introduced him to a small evil-smelling hotel in a low quarter, and after a night's wild conviviality he woke to find himself, not like Byron, "famous," but robbed of his all! Money, guns, portmanteau had vanished; what to him remained was one five-pound note, and a kit-bag. Even his letter of introduction was gone, and he could not remember the name and address of the man who was to have given him "a lift." The thieves were never traced, and indeed some supposed that Leonard's story was a clumsy invention; if he *would* put up at a low tavern, and drink rye whisky and gamble, he got what he deserved!

No, his new acquaintances were neither friendly nor helpful, and he dared not write home and announce his loss; for well he knew he would get no

help from his austere old grandmother, who would say :

“ Just what I expected from stupid Leonard ! ”

Penniless and a stranger, stupid Leonard was obliged to exert all his energies in order to earn his daily bread. First he had a job on the railway, then he drove a traction plough on a farm, finally he was engaged as an assistant to a blacksmith. He contrived to keep his head above water, and so five years passed.

Leonard Harling was active, honest, and hard-working, but he had no initiative, push, or self-assertion, and he had never risen beyond the grade of manual labour, until he came across Lizzie Aitken. Within twenty miles of where he worked, a flourishing town was holding a week's festivities. There were to be dances, cricket, and sports, and for this Leonard and two young men, his mates, took a whole holiday. As an accomplished athlete, the handsome, well-knit young Englishman carried off the most coveted prizes—the one-mile race, hurdle race, and high jump—all fell to Leonard Harling ! He wore his school colours, and made an attractive figure in his jersey, shorts, and shoes—relics of old Harrow days, which he had clung to, whatever his difficulties. This graceful, dark-eyed stranger was watched with unusual interest by all the young women present.

Among these was Lizzie Aitken—the beauty and heiress of Tolputt. Her father, the son of a Scotch shepherd, had come out to Canada, a canny hard-bitten laddie, and steadily worked his way up rung by rung ; he was now rich, and the mayor of the town, and his only child Lizzie, a pretty red-haired lassie, was the apple of his eye. She had received a fair education, could dance, embroider, play the piano, and cook ; and it was his intention that, with her fine dowry, Lizzie should make a really splendid

match—aye, and keep her carriage and servants, and live in style.

Lizzie became acquainted with young Harling at a ball. He wore, beside his recent laurels, an air of distinction—a romantic glamour surrounded this good-looking English visitor.

In comparison to the local swains, he had an assured ease, a charming manner—he might be a prince in disguise. Lizzie invited him to her home, where, appearances being in his favour, he was well received by her parent, and a week passed like a summer day. The love affair blazed up between the young people, but was ruthlessly quenched by old Aitken when he discovered that “the Prince,” as he was nicknamed, was only the hired help of Job Mackay, the blacksmith over by Lomax.

In spite of enormous difficulties, the couple corresponded, met, and finally eloped. They went out West, and for the first year their lines were laid in thorny places; but by dint of courage and industry they managed to hold out and make a living.

Lizzie, who was practical, clever, and energetic, remembered words of wisdom which had fallen from her father’s lips, respecting their retreat.

“A great future awaits Saint Largo in a few years time, though it’s a miserable hole *now*. It will be a golden city; it has a lake, and wonderful possibilities for trade; when it gets the railway it is *made!*”

With this prophecy ever in her mind, Lizzie Harling took hold. She started a sort of cheap restaurant in her rough and draughty shack, and as she was a born cook, and a thrifty manager, the “hotel” paid. Besides the hotel, she undertook the post-office, and the business of newsagent to the community. Everyone agreed that “Missis Harling” was “real smart,” and Leonard, her husband, realised that if he had no fortune with his Lizzie, she represented a priceless

treasure. For his part he set up a smithy, and kept a good team of horses, which he hired out for freight and farm work—and presently the Harlings began to prosper. The one cloud on their happiness was the loss of two small children—an empty cradle represented their tragedy.

As time advanced, all the hard-earned numerous dollars were invested in land in and around Saint Largo, and when at last the railway came, it brought them fortune. The Harlings no longer occupied a shack; Leonard had built his wife a fine solid brick house; the furniture hailed from Toronto, and included a piano and cheval glass. He urged her to spend money, to buy smart clothes and jewellery, and enjoy life "like other women." But she laughed, and protested at his extravagance, and said :

"I've got out of the way of shopping. The greatest pleasure I really enjoy is sitting hand-idle in my rocker, listening to the hired girl washing up the dishes and saucepans, which was my own job for twelve years."

About this time, old Aitken, who had forgiven the successful couple, died, and left his only child a large and well-invested fortune, and the Harlings were the richest and most influential people in a bustling, prosperous place that now called itself a city. After considerable hesitation they decided on a trip to the Old Country, where Leonard endeavoured to trace his brother—of whom he had lost sight for years.

Humphrey remained in Australia, and wrote from there at long intervals, and then all letters had ceased. The family lawyer whom Leonard interviewed informed him that his brother had married in Melbourne, and not very long afterwards he died. What had happened to the widow or children—if any—he could not say.

Subsequently Leonard took his wife to visit what

had been the home of his ancestors; and the result of this excursion (as is sometimes the case) was disappointing. Twenty years had effaced many old friends, memories, and landmarks; the ancient family was forgotten.

Now, after a lapse of another ten years, the Harlings were once more in London, and had spent three months in this hotel, pretending to one another that they were having the time of their lives. They did a round of theatres, operas, pictures, dinners at restaurants, and stiff dinners with business people who desired to be civil to the Canadian millionaire. They themselves entertained various Canadian acquaintances and fellow-passengers, but they had no relatives or intimates, and all the time felt themselves to be strangers in a strange land.

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Presently Leonard Harling turned away from the window, picked up a paper and sat down. His wife watched him surreptitiously; he was reading the advertisements—anything to pass the time! He did not belong to a club, he did not play bridge, he did not enjoy idleness. When his companion heaved an involuntary sigh he looked up and said :

“ Say, Lizzie, I believe we made a bad shot coming over this time. We seem a bit out of the picture—and everything is so confoundedly slow.”

“ Yes, one misses the whirl at home—the Committee Meetings, and the big house and gardens, and neighbours—and the dogs.”

“ We have no special deep-down-rooted interests—that’s what ails us.”

“ Well anyhow, you have your grand collection, Len, your silver,” and Mrs. Harling waved a knitting-needle at a row of priceless tankards, that shone on a cabinet between the windows.

"Silver, yes—it's just a hobby; but there's nothing to it; it amuses me, and circulates the coin. What I miss is a live, human interest."

"I know," and she nodded, "such as a son or a daughter. Yes, I'd be thankful to go back to dish-washing, cooking, and slavery, for that."

"Now would you, Lizzie? Well, I must confess I could not help envying the party last night at the next table—father, mother, two pretty daughters, son in the Guards, and friend—what a cheery lot they were; so gay and genial and happy."

"It's a pity we could never trace your brother's widow."

"I expect she's out in Australia. I wrote to Humphrey after we were married, and he sent me a lecture as a wedding-present. He was no longer at Government House; but he did not mention his job. I say, you know we dine early, and have stalls at the Haymarket, so you'd better go and dress, and I'll run down and look at the tape."

Leonard Harling was a well-known collector and authority on old silver; his name was frequently quoted in articles, he was a personage of importance in sale rooms, and catalogues pursued him wherever he went. What he enjoyed and delighted in was to poke about among dingy little antiquary shops or pawn-offices. A window full of what looked like rubbish invariably held his attention, and more than once he had picked up a prize.

One afternoon he and his wife were staring into a mixed collection in a pawnbroker's in Soho. Here were strings of coral, scraps of old lace, bits of china, spotted prints, and a few battered watches, and teapots.

"Do you see that sugar-bowl?" said Mrs. Harling. "Black—possibly pewter—but a nice old shape."

"Yes, how sharp you are, Liz. You mean the one

full of glass beads. I'll just go in and have a look at it."

The shop was squalid and common, and evidently traded with the really poor; clothes and boots were piled up within, and there was also an assortment of cheap clocks and umbrellas. The assistant, a young Hebrew with glossy hair, wore many rings, and from the private premises came an appetising smell of fried fish.

"The sugar-bowl?" he repeated, reaching for it. "Yes; oh, it's silver all right," and he polished it with a cloth. "See, it's Georgian, but not for sale, I think. A fine piece—the young fellow might be tempted—I fancy he's hard up," and he handed it over, and Leonard Harling assumed his pince-nez. First he examined the marks—all right; then the crest. His hand shook a little when he recognised his own!—the torch and crown—and, like a flash, he seemed to remember this very sugar-bowl in the blue-veined hand of his grandmother.

"Who does it belong to?" he enquired.

"We cannot give names of our clients," was the pompous reply.

"Not if it is in their interest—and—er—yours?" and Harling touched his pocket with significance. The salesman hesitated, relaxed his attitude and said:

"I'll go and look up the book," and he left them.

"Lizzie, I've a clue—this sugar-bowl you spotted! It's got the family crest, and I believe it came from Humphrey. We'll find out who pawned it—of course it's an off-chance."

"Yes, sir, I've the address," said the assistant, returning: "'P. Harling, 5, Russell Buildings, W.C.'—workmen's flats. The article is pawned for one pound—it's worth twenty. I see you know something of its quality."

"Do you think you could manage for me to interview the owner. What is he like?"

"Oh, a young chap—gentlemanly—shabby. I only saw him after dark."

"Can you, as a great favour, ask him to meet me here, or elsewhere?"

"I'll see what I can do; it's a bit unusual, you know."

"And you'll do your best. Here is my card, and telephone to the hotel. Write to-night; be as slick as you can—you'll find it will be worth your while."

"I think we may be on the trail, Liz," he said, as they walked away. "No harm in seeing P. Harling. If he looks a dissipated ruffian—so much the worse; but if he's my relative I'll give him a leg up. We may know by to-morrow night."

At seven o'clock the next evening, the landing waiter informed Mr. Harling that a young man had called to see him, but did not give his name.

"Where is he?"

"Oh, in the hall, sir; I think he's a clerk from some place of business."

"Show him up here."

The instant Harling's eyes fell on the well-set-up but shabby stranger, he was struck by the amazing likeness to his brother. Undoubtedly this stranger was his nephew! Nevertheless he began his enquiries with caution, as he motioned him to a seat, and said :

"I've an idea that you may be able to tell me something of a relative who died in Melbourne. His name was Humphrey Harling."

"It was my father's name," calmly responded the visitor. Then by degrees—for Humphrey's son was inclined to be stiff and reserved—Harling extracted all the information he required. His brother, who had inherited the family failing, got into serious

money difficulties; he married a fashionable dress-maker, who supported him. They had two children—twins, boy and girl. He was killed in a street accident, and his widow brought the twins to England, partly for education, and partly in the hope of finding her husband's people. She too fell on evil days, but made at her trade sufficient to educate her children and keep a roof over her head. Now she was gone the twins lived together; he was a clerk to a stock-broker, and she a typist in a bank. Just at present Lily was ill, recovering from diphtheria, and they had been obliged to pawn one or two things.

This young man, who had the nose and voice and self-possession of his race, was astounded when this inquisitive elderly gentleman came forward with outstretched hand, and claimed him as his nephew! He had been under the impression that he wished to buy the sugar-bowl. What an extraordinary change this bit of old silver had made in his life, and Lily's! She was immediately moving to a nursing home, and he to quarters in this grand hotel. He was fitted out by a fashionable tailor, and slipped into his new part with surprising ease; but all the same, remained a quiet, unassuming youth, anxious to adapt himself to his new relatives. He was devoted to his sister, had a practical turn of mind, and, unless "stupid Leonard" was mistaken, Peregrine the younger (in reality Sir Peregrine) had brains!

Leonard Harling and Lizzie his wife were delighted with their "find"; the girl was so pretty and sweet-tempered, the boy a really fine young fellow; and when they returned to their home (of late years near Hamilton) they carried with them, besides stores of ancient silver, a wonderful source of new interests, new hopes, and present happiness—all imported into their lives by an old crested sugar-bowl.

### XIII

#### THE CREAKING BOARD

BRAMLEIGH PLACE, a fine specimen of an early Jacobean dwelling, had been in the Millard family for nearly three centuries, but of late years the Millards had fallen on evil days. There was no money to maintain the property in fitting state, the farms were let, as well as the shooting; graziers rented the park to the borders of the pleasure ground; the house was closed, and abandoned to dust and spiders; the garden was free to weeds and birds. An elderly couple had been installed in "The Place" as caretakers, but these looked upon it as nothing more or less than a lonesome, draughty, inconvenient abode—a whole mile from the village and a glass of whisky.

Now and then, in summer-time, lodgers at farms, or in the village, would walk over to the stately old mansion, and bribe Mrs. Pilcher to show them around; and she was not inaccessible. Odd shillings, also the price of tea and bread and butter, made a nice little addition to her weekly wages. She opened the tall doors and the heavy shutters, and invited paying visitors into the great saloon, there to gaze upon the Bramleigh Vandyke—a handsome cavalier, with a satin coat and long fair locks—as well as many other valuable paintings and family portraits by Reynolds and Lely, old lacquered cabinets and Chippendale chairs, wonderful settees, card-tables, and screens. Most of the great lofty rooms were half empty, for on the bankruptcy of the late Sir Aubrey Millard there had been a sensational auction, but the

residue happened to be heirlooms, and as such, fixtures; and the house was in the curious condition of being neither unfurnished nor yet furnished. Mrs. Pilcher, as she ushered her customers in and out of apartments, and up and down stairs, related many surprising tales of the Millards, and gave the house the reputation of being badly haunted. She was a clever old body, with a loose tongue and a warm imagination, and such were her powers of description, that more than one of her listeners, passing late on the distant highroad, looked down upon the dignified Place, standing in a hollow, with a sensation of fearsome awe.

Young Millard, the owner, was with his regiment in India; there he made the acquaintance of a wealthy American family on tour, and subsequently married the daughter—a charming girl, with a fabulous fortune. Young Lady Millard fell in love with Bramleigh at first sight—it was a place after her own heart!—and she hurried from room to room, exclaiming in raptures as she made discoveries of pictures, tapestries, and furniture—hailing these, one by one, as delightful possessions and priceless treasures. The prompt and energetic new mistress commanded that Bramleigh was to be set in order without delay; the aged Pilchers were dismissed with a pension, and replaced, first by an army of workmen and upholsterers, and then by a staff of gardeners, grooms, and indoor servants. Soon there were horses and motors in the great empty yard, as well as new stables, and a garage. The mouldy Justice Room was turned into a lounge, and long-deserted Bramleigh was transformed by the enchanted wand, which is known as “Monev.”

Lady Millard and her husband were young, gay, and popular; they entertained parties for shooting, cricket, and week-ends, as London was only forty

miles away; they also were entertained, and frequently from home—or spending a week or two in town. On these occasions, the large number of unemployed servants had ample time to themselves—and Satan was not idle.

Among the women, Fanny Lappage, second housemaid, was the ringleader in mischief and fun; moreover, a remarkably pretty girl and a shameless flirt, with half the men at her beck and call. For all her giddiness, she was a first-rate housemaid, and never shirked work—only for this, the housekeeper would have dismissed her; she was too flighty, too saucy, and too pretty; but there never was a better girl for polishing furniture or turning out a room—and besides, her ladyship liked Fanny.

Chief among Fanny's slaves was James Hegan, a tall, fine-looking footman, Irish by descent, with jet-black hair, and deep-set dark blue eyes. Naturally smart, silent, and impassive, he was an admirable servant—though plagued out of his wits by Fanny Lappage and her vagaries. She was continually teasing him, and ridiculing him in the servants' hall, or the still-room, and the long stone passages often echoed with her ringing laugh at Hegan's expense; whilst he could only stare stupidly, marvel at her cleverness, and admire her bewitching little face.

Trail, the butler, and Mrs. Madden, housekeeper, had often and vainly remonstrated with giddy Fanny—sometimes she really went too far. By a curious instinct, she had discovered that Hegan was nervous and superstitious—on this subject she chaffed him constantly and mercilessly; yet, strange to say, the more she flouted and tormented him, the more ardently he adored her. He was of a naturally silent and melancholy disposition, and it was Fanny's amazing liveliness that appealed to him. As for superstition—superstition was in his blood (as a

child, he had listened to many a weird tale from the lips of an Irish grandmother), and this characteristic was kept alive, and even fanned, by conversations he overheard at his master's table whilst he waited automatically—listening with all his ears.

Lady Millard had imbibed the modern taste for the occult and psychical speculations; and some of the experiences he overheard were so vividly described as to be almost hair-raising. Hegan's hand shook as he handed dishes and plates. Certain subjects lay beyond his mental reach, but one was easily comprehended. He understood a genial gentleman—a neighbour—who, with a jovial laugh, remarked :

“I suppose, Lady Millard, you know that you have something *here!*—an apparition—and, by all accounts, it's pretty bad too; it is—”

Here Lady Millard made a quick little sign, and then she too laughed, and said something in French, and the guest replied :

“Oh yes; by Jove!—all right, then—another time!”

But all the same, the seed had taken ‘root’ in Hegan's mind—“Something” had assumed alarming and sinister proportions.

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The family were yachting at Cowes; it was an unusually warm and sultry July, and the staff at Bramleigh, with nothing to do, and an ample allowance of animal food and beer, felt more or less lazy—not to say comatose. The visit of Mrs. Pilcher (late caretaker) effected an agreeable diversion; this old body was full of stimulating local gossip and housewives' tales, and always well worth her tea! The maids encouraged her to talk; they drew her out, and she entertained them with amazing stories, and “they says” of the Millard family.

" You lived here fifteen year, Mrs. Pilcher," said the vivacious Fanny, " and never saw anything worse nor yourself—eh?—come now! Why, surely there must be a ghost in a big rambling old place like this? Don't you tell *me* there ain't! "

" There may be," rejoined Mrs. " Pil," nursing her teacup as she spoke, " but I never went about after dark. Tom and me allus sat in the library, and slep' in the morning-room—us hadn't the breath for stairs—and them above rampaged about as they liked; no need for us an inter-meddling—and them passages and corridors for wind would skin you alive! "

" Didn't you never *see* anything? " persisted Fanny. " Come, now, we're all friends here."

" Only rats in plenty—the kitchen was black wid 'em—and them as big as rabbits."

" Rats like rabbits—but nothing more? Come, now, Mrs. Pil; surely someone has seen a ghost—try and remember, and I'll give you a nice little present. I do love to hear of horrors."

" Well, then, Fanny Lappage, since you *are* so set on and eager, I did hear summat—summat as was told me by the folk as was here afore us—and left."

" Did they see anything? Oh, Jim! " beckoning to Hegan, " and Rosie, Ethel, and George and Tom—*do* come along and listen—it's awful fun. Mrs. Pil is going to tell us about the ghost that's here—she will make our flesh creep. Won't it be lovely! "

" I'm not so sure," muttered Jim, turning to Mrs. Pilcher. " What's it all about, mother? "

Mrs. Pilcher appreciated an audience; she wiped her mouth deliberately with a spotted handkerchief, rubbed her hands on her knees, nodded at the circle which had gathered about her, and cleared her throat.

" You all know the old wing—the long passage, and the swing-door? "

There was a chorus of "Yes, yes, yes—why, to be sure!"

"The three big low rooms looking south over the shrubberies and into the park—main old, they say—well, it's *there!*!" and she paused dramatically. Mrs. "Pil" was a gifted story-teller. "Afore our time" (she spoke as if they had been deposed sovereigns) "the caretaker and wife and girl lived in that wing, as it were warm and convenient. They allowed they heard walking and talking, but were never properly frightened, till one hot summer night when the man was late in the village. There was a full moon, and it was that stifling they had the doors and windows open—'twas the middle room, d'ye see? Mother and girl was a-making ready for bed, and the house locked up. All of a sudden they fell in a terrible taking, a sort of fright as threw 'em into a cold sweat—and they could not say for why, or wherefore; but hot as it was, they felt like two blocks of ice. Then they heard the swing-door slam, and someone in high heels come a-pattering along the passage—nearer and nearer. There it must be in the doorway, for the floor had a loose board and creaked. They was awful afraid to look, as they knew in their bones something not right was standin' there, and yet look they had to! And sure enough, right on the creakin' board was a lady in a queer, puffed-out sort of dress, awful old-fashioned. She had a long, shiny knife in her hand, and they two felt turned to stone. At the moment they heard the man below shoutin' for the key of the side door, and the wife had just strength to tie it in her apron and throw it out of the window. Then the lady went off; they heard her a-patterin' quick down the passage, and the swing-door a-slammin' behind her. After that, they lived down below—but never saw her again, nor ever give her a chance, as they did not venture above after dusk. They say she had

black eyes and looked awful wicked—just set on ill-doing, but young, and handsome. When the man died—he was found dead, they do say—the wife and daughter come away and were thankful—and we took the place; but if it was my last breath, though I heard what I heard—I never *saw* nothing'!"

"And so it's the middle room in the old wing," said Fanny briskly. "I know—it has a high chimney-piece and three windows."

"Aye, that's it; and they give out the noises and the trouble is allus worser in summer-time, and full o' the moon, and that whenever you hear a board creak in these old floors, *she* is not far off!"

Mrs. Pilcher suddenly rose to her feet, shook the crumbs from her gown, and took leave; she understood the value of a brief and effective departure.

At supper that evening there was an animated discussion respecting the creaking board, and the lady with the shining knife. Fanny, in the wildest spirits, challenged George, James, Tom, or Mr. Trail himself, to go and meet the ghost in the middle room—she even offered them a vague reward. But no one came forward to pick up her gage, in spite of her jeers and gibes. The household was, however, profoundly interested to recognise among the family portraits in the library the identical lady, as described by Mrs. Pilcher, with a long thin face, black eyes, white powdered hair, and a mole on her chin.

The days that followed were dull and drowsy. Fanny invested all her superfluous energies in incessantly tormenting James Hegan. At last he became desperate, and said:

"Well, look here, Fan; as you say the moon is near the full, it's summer—now's my chance for the ghost! But if I go alone to the middle room in the oak corridor at twelve o'clock, leave the door open, and bring your thimble from off the mantelpiece, and

stay there for an hour, you will marry me—come, now. I'll go for that—and no less, I swear!"

To this ultimatum Fanny, after much sparring and giggling, eventually agreed. Jim was a handsome fellow; though he had no talk, he had more inches and broader shoulders than anyone in the house—not to speak of considerable savings.

Sir Eldred and Lady Millard were not expected for a week, and the ordeal was fixed for a certain day and hour. Fanny was unusually lively, talkative, and irresponsible, and all the under-servants were agog with keen anticipation.

When the great evening arrived, Jim, who was secretly in a deadly fright (and had fortified himself with two glasses of beer), was conducted to the swing-door, and seen off about eleven o'clock by all his associates, with many jokes, and good wishes for the success of his adventure. He was too early—his friends had been so anxious to speed him; he felt a sense of dull resentment as he pulled the baize door behind him, walked down the corridor, and entered the middle room, now flooded by moonlight. First of all he went over to the chimney-piece and appropriated Fanny's dainty little thimble. Then for a long time he stood by the window gazing on the sleeping woods, and waiting—for what? he asked himself. The night air was hot and breathless, every sound was audible, from the flutter of a bat's wings or the hoot of an owl to the far-away barking of a dog or the hum of a belated motor on the distant highroad.

Gradually he became aware of a stillness, a chilliness, and a silence—as if Nature were holding her breath prior to some prodigious effort. He was also sensible of a cold sensation of creeping uneasiness, and began to realise that his Dutch courage had evaporated, and that he felt sickeningly nervous.

Tales from his grandmother, and tales from the dinner-table, invaded his memory, and repeated themselves with a vividness of detail, and a plausibility befitting the hour, the locality, and the man.

Yet, so far, nothing had happened! Possibly it was all nonsense and rot, urged another cheerful mental voice; his spirits stirred, and rose. But what was *that*?

A sudden reckless slamming of the swing-door—yes, and footsteps—quick, light footsteps, coming along the corridor! Hegan's heart flew into his throat; he felt almost suffocated with terror as he backed into the window, and stared at the entrance.

But the noise had entirely ceased—ceased for five immensely long minutes; for ten—there was nothing to be seen! With an extraordinary sensation of relief he turned away, leant his elbows on the open sash, and once more gazed down into the moonlit park. In ten minutes more he would be free to go! As he stood listening anxiously for the striking of the stable clock, his senses were strung to the utmost—his ears alive to every sound.

Suddenly he heard the sharp creaking of a board, and flung round. She stood in the doorway! A lady with a powdered head and bunchy petticoats; by one hand she held a handkerchief to her face, in the other was a long and glittering knife!

And—she was coming in—she was approaching. Panic seized upon him, and seemed to gnaw his knees. In a spasm of mortal fear—the frenzy of the trapped animal that turns on its destroyer—he snatched up a heavy old chair. Hegan was a powerful man—it was as a straw to him in his present desperation—and he dashed at the figure in a fury of terror, struck it twice with all his force, and felled it to the ground.

The thing gave a stifled shriek, and moaned—yes

—but he threw down his weapon, and fled as for his very life.

When he gained the hall, ghastly and breathless, he found an eagerly expectant crowd. The first footman, noticing his face, exclaimed :

“ Hallo! Jimmy, old boy—you look as if you’d seen her! ”

“ Yes,” he gasped out, “ she was there—knife and all! ”

“ And what did you do? ”

“ I picked up a chair and struck at her, and ran! ” He was still livid and panting for breath.

Several of the women looked at one another significantly, and at last the cook said :

“ Why, James, don’t you know it was all a bit of a joke? ”

“ Joke! ” he repeated, and his eye travelled swiftly round the circle, in speechless quest of Fanny.

“ Where’s Fanny? ” he asked abruptly.

“ You’ve just seen her; the ghost was Fanny herself. We dressed her up, and floured her hair—and —— ”

“ And,” he added in a loud, hoarse voice, “ I believe—I’ve done for her! I—I hit her a terrible blow! Fanny! Fanny! ” he shouted, and he raced up the stairs, followed by all the inmates of the Place.

They crowded through the swing-door and streamed along the passage into the middle room. There on the floor lay a little dressed-up figure with a horrible wound in her head—a knife clutched in her grasp—stone dead!

Nor was this the worst. When Hegan realised that he had unintentionally killed his pretty, mocking sweetheart, he kissed her, rose from beside her, and, before anyone had guessed his intention, sprang on the sill, hurled himself out of the window, and, with

a crash among branches, fell heavily on the lawn with a broken neck.

Sir Eldred and Lady Millard, hastily summoned from Cowes, were horrified to find on their return home that two of their household lay awaiting an inquest in the old unused laundry—their fate the result of a practical joke—and for many months Lady Millard deserted the Place, and made her home in Continental hotels.

At Bramleigh the middle room in the oak corridor has long been closed; but the double tragedy has left its mark. After dusk, the maids go about in couples; a creaking board throws them into a paroxysm of terror, and they snatch at one another, and whisper, "*She's somewhere about!*" for Bramleigh enjoys the unique reputation of being haunted by the ghost—of a ghost!

## XIV

### THE SWORD OF LANBRYDE

RUSHOLME PLACE, a fine old mansion in the Midlands, is seated in a picturesque and well-wooded park, and surrounded by the usual accompaniments of lawns, pleasure-grounds, and gardens. The exterior of Rusholme, although it presents a most attractive appearance, is as nothing compared with the treasures within.

The large entrance hall, and billiard-room, which opens out of it, are said to be an admixture of the Natural History and the Victoria and Albert Museums of South Kensington! The walls of both are covered with trophies of the chase (their owner was a dead-shot, and went far afield for sport). A magnificent bull-moose from Nova Scotia faces a life-like bison,

late from Southern India; fine heads of deer surmount the doorways; and along the walls are high glass cases, containing specimens of rare birds, and small animals, such as snow-white hares, weasels, etc. This is the natural history department; there are also displayed in these rooms inlaid damascened Indian arms; Afghan guns; old Spanish chairs upholstered in Cordova leather; a stand of rare books—which include a beautifully illustrated Koran, picked up on a battle-field. A wonderful Chinese embroidered curtain drapes a wall, in front of which stands a table holding a Russian samovar, and a Japanese incense-burner in bronze, of the most terrifying description. In the hall is an ancient carved chest, said to have been washed ashore from the Spanish Armada. Here are also several exquisite figures of Grecian type, about two feet high—these had been dug up on the banks of the Indus, and were said to have been left behind by the hosts of Alexander the Great. Wherever you looked within these two rooms, there was something interesting to see, but it was at night that—astonishing fact—there was something interesting to *hear*.

After the genial party of billiard players had departed, when the lights were extinguished, the house closed and buried in silence, the collection from all parts of the world exchanged experiences—personal or otherwise, and held discussions—but these were not always attended with success. The stag and the tiger had high words; it had been found necessary to interrupt and silence the stoat and the white hare. It was considered more prudent to confine the evening entertainments to the harmless form of story-telling. The great moose was chairman of the company; the bison, his *vis-à-vis*, vice-chairman; the Chinese incense-burner and an Afghan jazail occasionally interposed remarks, but, on the whole, peace reigned supreme.

"I now call upon the Ferrara Blade," said the deep bass of the moose; "let us hear your tale."

After a moment's silence, a thin, sharp voice from a corner began without further preamble: "My story, good listeners, is ancient history, but it is true. I will merely relate one incident—no need to more than touch on my own life, for to tell my adventures would take hours. I am a well-tempered Andrea Ferrara blade, married to a Spanish handle of great value. By chance, I entered a military family, and descended from father to son. I have seen desperate fighting in the Low Countries—aye, and in the New World. After a long time came peace—there was no work for me, and I was hung up in my scabbard over a fireplace in the library of the ancient mansion of my Lord of Lanbryde. His home was right in the north of Scotland—its lands were lipped by an ocean that had its further shore in the Arctic Circle. The wind was fine and strong—the sunsets recalled the tropics; air and land bred bold fishermen, and big-boned folk, who held themselves high, and knew not the word 'fear.' It was recorded that the race came from the Danes.

"Blairvie, my Lord, was heir to great estates, a tall old man, with a high, hooked nose and bushy brows, a famous swordsman and gamester in his day—which was over. Now he had nought to do but mind his property and harry his tenants. He was a hard landlord—hard to all the world except himself. Married to a lord's daughter, he had two children—a son in a Highland regiment, and one girl. Blairvie was a tyrant to them, and to everyone within his reach; he turned out folk from places where they and their forebears had lived for generations.

"One very old woman crawled to his door and begged for mercy, but he was as stone. She went down on her knees, and said:

“ ‘ Blairvie, let me die in my ain wee housie. I pray you to leave me where I was born and bred—my time must now be short.’

“ But it was all of no use—Blairvie was adamant—so she uprose, and cursed him to his face.

“ ‘ Ye have ta’en away the land from us, aye, and from many—ye that has plenty. See now,’ she said, ‘ I lay my malison on you: the land will be ta’en away from you and yours—for ever and ever. Your descendants will not own a yard of green turf, and will die beggars ! ’ and then she fell in a sort of fit, and was thrown out.

“ For some time afterwards there was great talk of the old witch and her curse, and the ‘ wierd ’ pronounced against Blairvie; but by degrees the whole thing died away. The lands of Lanbryde were fertile, for much of the soil was old and rich; the sheep, cattle, and orchards were beyond anything for excellence. The place, a great big house, square to the winds, lay back in a bay between two big horns of shingle—but the whole beach was covered with beautiful sand, so fine that it could run through an hour-glass.

“ By gradual degrees, it was noticed that the sea was encroaching; huge mounds of sands had accumulated—some of them one hundred feet in height—and the sand seemed scarcely ever at rest. In strong westerly gales it drifted about, and seemed so violent and tormented, one might have supposed that the furies were locked in mortal combat. The size and increase of the dunes were so imperceptibly stealthy, that it was scarcely noticed by those who lived in the neighbourhood, but chiefly spoken of by people who had been absent for some time. By and bye, the old coast-line began to break up, the sea made extensive inroads, and there was a certain wasting of the fore-shore. These high banks of sand afforded but a feeble

barrier to the power of storms from the north—which forced them further and further inshore; and still no one minded, for a gale from the south usually blew them back to their former position.

“ One November night a fearful gale descended on the coast. A sand-flood overwhelmed the fields, the orchards, the gardens of Lanbryde—here was a deluge that nothing could arrest. Ghostly clouds of white sand, falling and whirling, above, below—in short, everywhere. The torrent seemed to be a living force; it poured over the mansion, and down its chimneys, burst the doors and windows, and blocked the stairs. The storm was as sudden as it was violent—it approached with a howling, mighty wind, sheets and clouds of a thin, white substance, tons—millions of tons—of sand. The people of the house had barely time to escape with their lives, before the doors and stairs were choked. The young heir—who happened to be home on leave—as he rushed out last, bethought himself of the family sword—in short, of *me!* He ran back, fought his way to the fireplace, while the wind roared and the sand poured, wrenched me from the wall, and sped forth. But in the doorway a blast met him and knocked him prostrate—the cruel sand fell on him, and choked him where he lay; he struggled and fought—it was like being in the heart of a quick-sand. After desperate efforts he gave up the ghost, and so perished miserably—and there he and I rested together for eighty long years. By mid-day, after the gale, such was the result of shifting dunes, that the very situation of the mansion was lost—and the whole property, a vast expanse of sand, was pointed out to newcomers as the grave of the house, and estates, of Lanbryde.

“ At last, after nearly a century had elapsed, a furious western hurricane suddenly altered the figures of many sandhills. Another violent storm arose, a

whirlwind equal to the first, and it raged all night with a ruthless force. At sunrise, when the folk began to stir, they rubbed their eyes, and wondered if they were still asleep. Then they recalled the story of Lanbryde. The mansion had reappeared—had arisen, like a great, gaunt skeleton, from the mass of sand in which it had been entombed, its rows of empty windows, like eyeless sockets, dominating the scene.

“Naturally the news spread, and Lanbryde was immediately visited, and, as far as possible, entered. But the interior was still choked. The body of the unfortunate heir was discovered—that is to say, his bones—and I, who lay unscathed in my scabbard, was carried away as prize by a searcher, and sold for a few shillings to an armourer in Inverness, who sent me south, where I fetched, as I deserved, a noble price. Great efforts were made to recover furniture and pictures that were known to be in Lanbryde, but beyond a few silver spoons and the whorls of a distaff, nothing could be reclaimed, for before any active steps could be taken, another furious sand-drift struck the coast, and the ancient mansion of Lanbryde disappeared for ever.

“When the last owner’s daughter died in poverty abroad, the family became extinct, and of their great fame, and high place in the world, nothing now remains but an old Italian sword.—Good-night !”

## XV

### THE KING’S SHILLING

IT was a melancholy afternoon early in November, and a cold pitiless rain was streaming down the

library windows of Clonallon, the Irish residence of Sir Domnick Donnelly, Bart., J.P., D.L.

At the other side of the wet panes, a pretty young face gazed out upon the falling dusk and fallen leaves, with an expression of hopeless boredom. Clonallon was one of those solid box-shaped mansions that arose in the country two centuries ago: spacious and comfortable, with fine lofty rooms for the family, and gloomy caverns for their retainers; it boasted a prolific garden, a fine demesne, and a long and imposing avenue. On the other hand, it was ten miles from a station, did not possess a bathroom, and could only count upon one post a day.

Sir Domnick and his wife (an elderly, childless couple) were entirely satisfied with their abode—and themselves; they maintained a certain amount of state and formality, and processed about the neighbourhood in an open carriage with two men-servants and a pair of steppers. Recently a powerful motor had displaced the landau, and the owners were so exuberantly proud of their new possession that one would almost suppose it was the very first car that had ever been landed in Ireland!

The disconsolate girl in the window was also a visitor from England; her mother, Mrs. de Lisle, a smart evergreen widow, had certain "expectations" from her relatives the Donnellys, and made a yearly pilgrimage to Clonallon, in order, as she told herself, "to keep the old people up to the mark." She was handsome and popular, with a pair of beguiling eyes, and an insatiable appetite for society and excitement. The large fortune left by her husband was strictly tied up for the benefit of their daughter Vera. Vera, at eighteen, looked younger than her age: so very soft and simple, and was treated as a mere irresponsible flapper by her parent; nevertheless Vera had inherited a self-reliant enterprising character from the de Lises

(also a streak of daring and independence), but had not as yet found an opportunity of exhibiting herself in her true colours.

Life at Clonallon was desperately dull, and she sorely missed the society of her girl friends; here, everyone was so old—not merely Sir Domnick and Lady Donnelly, but even the servants and dogs—whilst the venerable green parrot was in his dotage. The days seemed endless, from family prayers to family prayers, the interim filled up with eating and drinking, driving abroad to pay calls, or receiving weird-looking visitors at home.

Once, oh great and happy occasion! they had all motored to a neighbouring Meet; that was, indeed, a delightful outing. On Sundays the family attended a funny old church that smelt of mushrooms, and had deep mysterious pews like rows of horse-boxes, as well as a very large gallery, and a very small congregation.

Alas, there were still ten days to put in before departure. Vera's mother was thrifty in some ways, and declared that short visits, long journeys, and perpetual "tips" were too costly. Also, that after a strenuous season, and Scotland, Clonallon served her as an inexpensive "rest cure."

Dusk was closing in over the pleasure grounds, and Vera, yawning till tears stood in her eyes, withdrew from her post and sat down on a stiff-backed old sofa, which stood between the tall windows.

Around a fine turf and wood fire the three elders were assembled, Sir Domnick smoking a meerschaum pipe, Mrs. de Lisle a Turkish cigarette—all three discussing the neighbourhood, and Vera was completely forgotten.

"And so your nearest neighbours are the Meldons?" Mrs. de Lisle was saying.

"The nearest people we *visit*," replied Lady Donnelly with significant emphasis.

"There is a big place in the trees, not more than two miles away, on what you call 'the back road.'"

"Yes—Heganstown—the Hegans live there."

"And don't you know them?" persisted Mrs. de Lisle.

After quite a marked pause, Lady Donnelly replied: "Not now."

"A feud—or a boycott?"

"Not exactly—although years ago there was a coolness about some shooting. To tell you the truth, we have dropped the Hegans—they are too impossible."

"Short of murder or theft, it seems a pity to drop such very near neighbours; it would have been so nice to have them over to bridge!"

"Bridge!" repeated Sir Domnick, "I don't suppose they have ever heard of it! Hegan and I were schoolfellows, he was my fag too; he comes of a good county family, went into the service, married, and when his father departed, came back to Heganstown with a nice little wife and a baby. Then Mrs. Hegan died, and he seemed to go to pieces; took to gambling on the Stock Exchange, betting, and whisky, and married a blowzy fat creature, who was once his cook! I believe she drinks, leads him the devil of a life, and keeps the little money he has left. He is sunken in a sort of stupor, and sits in his chair all day long; they do say his brain is affected. I must confess I am sorry for that young fellow Dermot."

"Yes; but why are you sorry?" enquired Mrs. de Lisle with an air of languid interest.

"The boy is out of his element; he went to Rugby, and did uncommonly well; was going into the Army, and had put in a couple of terms at Sandhurst, when the money ran out, and he was obliged to come home. He has been loafing about at Heganstown for the last three years."

" Dear me, how perfectly dreadful ! " ejaculated the lady.

" At first he tried his hand on the farm, and pulling the place together, but things were too far gone ; his father owed money all over the country, and the land was let up to the hall door. A grazier has it, and his cattle have played Old Harry with the grounds and the plantations ; there's not a gate or a fence ; the house is falling to ruin. Mrs. Hegan has made away with the good old furniture, and all the silver ; last time I was in Dublin I saw Hegan's grandfather in a shop ticketed ' Four Pounds Ten '—of course I mean his portrait."

" Why doesn't the young man try to do something ? "

" It's difficult to stir without money. I don't suppose the fellow has the price of a railway ticket, or a second coat to his back. In our soft relaxing climate it is so easy to let indolence grow on you—and to take things as they come."

" Dermot is a wonderful horseman," supplemented Lady Donnelly. " Men are only too glad to give him mounts in the hunting season ; he rides and breaks the maddest-looking animals, and I believe he is a fine shot too, but these accomplishments don't put a penny in his pocket. He has no companions of his own class—all the young men are out in the world."

" And the young women ? " suggested Mrs. de Lisle.

" Oh, none of the girls round here would look at Dermot, except perhaps farmers' daughters. I've heard he has been seen about the lanes with Mitty Flood—such a bold, shameless minx."

" Well, if young Hegan marries Mitty, he is *done!* " declared Sir Domnick. " I wish someone would give the poor boy a hand, and help him out of the quagmire ; the longer he sticks at home, the deeper

he sinks. I'm afraid he has no energy or push, and not a penny to his name—it's just a wasted life!"

"Does young Hegan come to church?" enquired Mrs. de Lisle, "and does he sit in the second deep box from the front, along with a red-faced female?"

"Yes," rejoined Lady Donnelly.

"Then he really looks quite presentable, and I believe I saw him at the Meet, riding a crazy chestnut."

"No doubt," assented Sir Domnick, "and if Dermot were to break his neck—under the circumstances, it would be the best thing that could happen to him!"

Vera, forgotten and in the background, had listened to this conversation with the closest interest and attention. She too recalled the good-looking young man she had seen in church and at the Meet; she had been struck by his masterly control of the frantic chestnut, and the delightful ease with which he kept his temper, and his seat.

The "automobile," as Lady Donnelly grandiloquently called it, held four comfortably, but no more, and, at present, such was its novelty and fascination, that its owners went out in it daily and in all weathers, partly perhaps to exhibit their acquisition, and to excite the envy of their friends.

Mrs. de Lisle enjoyed motoring; the soft moist air was, she believed, good for her cure and complexion, and therefore Vera, like the little pig of our childhood, was left at home. However, as it happened, Vera preferred rambling about the garden, the demesne, the adjacent bog, and making friends with the country-folk. Hobbs, her mother's maid, was supposed to be her escort, but Miss Hobbs, of London, disliked country walks, and frequently excused herself on the plea of a headache, or a corn; and Vera, with the two red setters, was suffered to depart alone, Hobbs

assuring herself that with the best wish in the world, her young lady—a dear simple child—could not get into any mischief.

But Hobbs was too sanguine. As she sat in the housekeeper's room with her feet on the fender, and a strong cup of "Ann Lynch's" best in her hand, imparting society episodes to a gaping audience, her charge was setting her pretty face in the direction of an adventure.

The bog she was so fond of was not the traditional dark tract, diversified by deep black holes and turf clamps, but a wide expanse of short grass, studded with furze bushes, and populated by goats, geese, and rabbits. The air was delicious, the sensation of unattended freedom intoxicating, the dogs were happy, and so was Vera. She had a secret and sincere love of Nature, and enjoyed her wild, unusual surroundings, and the odd sights and sounds—such as the flight of a V-shaped wedge of wild geese, the sudden rise of a jack snipe; and felt completely independent, and at home, as she walked briskly over the springy turf. A line of dark woods beckoned her thoughts to Heganstown, and the tragic fate of young Hegan, caught in a quagmire of circumstance, and compelled to lead a wasted life, with none to help him. Surely Sir Domnick might hold out a hand; but he wouldn't—no, he was a selfish old pig—yes, he *was*; he seized on all the new papers—even on the *Queen*; he took more than his share of cream and oysters, helped himself to the fowl's liver, and most of the motor rug—Vera had made it her business to watch him! No, he would only exert himself to the extent of his personal comforts, and young Hegan might hang himself for all he cared!

Sir Domnick's delinquencies, and the question of assisting Dermot Hegan, occupied her mind to the exclusion of everything else. She was wondering if

she could forward him anonymously a five-pound note, her godfather's tip, when she suddenly became aware of the rapid descent of a dense white mist, and could hardly see six yards ahead. For a moment she stood quite still, enveloped in a cloud of damp, impenetrable mist; then she started to retrace her steps, and after groping about for what seemed a long time, realised that she was lost! In some inexplicable manner she found herself upon an island apparently surrounded on all sides by trenches of unfathomable black water. This much she could discern. What she could *not* see, was any means of departure. Where was the wobbly stick that usually bridged such chasms? The fog now turned from white to grey, and she realised that her safest attitude was complete inactivity, and sat down on a mound all alone—having been basely abandoned by the two setters.

After a little reflection, she decided to call, to scream for help; her voice was a fine robust soprano, and carried fairly far.

Dermot Hegan, who had been shooting rabbits for the larder, and was, so to speak, feeling his way home, heard an unusual cry and halted. No, it was not a curlew or a trapped rabbit, or even an owl. There it was again, it came from a human throat, and said "Help! Help! Help!" Dermot knew every inch of the bog; the cry came from a part known as "the Puzzle," and it was not long before he had crossed the ditch, and called out, "All right." Then a shrill treble voice from the gloom announced, "I've lost my way; I don't know where I am!"

The young man struck a match, held it aloft, and discovered a girl, who had risen to her feet, and by the faint illumination they gravely inspected one another. He beheld a pretty face, and a pair of startled dark eyes; and she was confronted by the object of her meditations—no less a person than

Dermot Hegan. Then the match, after the manner of its kind, went out.

" You are the girl who is staying at Clonallon, are you not ? "

" Yes," she replied, " I wandered about, and got caught in the fog. Wherever I looked, I seemed to be surrounded by huge ditches full of black water. I was afraid to move—what *am* I to do ? "

" Sit tight for the present : I hope you don't mind waiting ? "

" What do you call waiting ? "

" Well, say an hour. The moon will be up then, and I will take you home."

" Oh, thank you. I think you must be Mr. Hegan ? "

" I wonder how you guessed ? Yes, we live within a quarter of a mile. I've known the bog since I was a baby—but I dare not venture to steer you about in the dark."

" No, it would not be safe, I am sure."

" Lots of people have been lost on the bog from time to time. They drop into these deep black holes, and the peat holds and preserves them. I remember long ago seeing the body of a girl, found after twenty years. Her friends recognised her at once, though she looked a bit leathery and dried up. Let me find you a seat," he added, striking another match.

Dermot Hegan had a nice well-bred voice, and by the flickering match Vera noticed his well-kept but rough hands, and frayed shirt-cuffs.

" How did you know I came from Clonallon ? " she asked, as they sat in outer darkness.

" I saw the dogs on the bog a while ago—we are great friends."

" You don't know their owner ? "

" No, I don't," came the answer from a little dis-

tance, where her companion had presumably found a seat.

Suddenly Vera, the lion-hearted and impulsive, made up her mind to take a bold step. With the supreme assurance of youth, she resolved to seize this priceless opportunity, and endeavour to open this young man's eyes to the dangers of his situation.

"Is it not surprising," she began, "that we two utter strangers should find ourselves imprisoned here in the dark?"

"Surprising things are said to happen on this particular spot," was his unexpected answer. "They say it's an old fairy rath, engulfed by the bog, and sometimes people can't find their way off it. There is a way, of course—but it's a bit of a puzzle. I expect your friends will be wondering what has become of you?"

"Oh no, they went for a long motor drive, and won't be home before seven."

"I think it's a little after six, so we are stuck here for the best part of an hour. What shall we do—tell stories, or sing?—do you sing?"

"Yes, but I'd much rather talk." As Vera could not see her listener, she felt surprisingly brave, and went on, "I have something to say to you."

"To say to *me*?" His voice expressed bewilderment.

"Yes, Chance or the fairies have given me this opening, and I must speak—even if you are mortally offended, and feel inclined to drown me in a bog-hole."

"I won't be offended—so go ahead; line clear."

"The other evening I heard Sir Domnick talking about—er—er—Heganstown; he said he and your father were school-fellows."

"That's right. Did he happen to tell you how we

had come down in the world, and were beggars?" The tone of the question was hard and bitter.

"He did, and he said he was so sorry for you, who were just wasting your life."

"That's true—it's a rotten life, I know. Did he suggest any alternative?"

"No; he said he was afraid you had acquired the loafing habit—and—"

"And what else?"

"And had an attraction in the neighbourhood."

"I suppose he meant a girl?"

"He did; her name is Mitty Flood. Lady Donnelly said she was a bold, pushing minx—nothing to what I am myself, at this moment—and I would never dare to say what I have said, only that you cannot see me now, and after this evening will never meet me again."

"No? I would not be so sure of that! So you are speaking out for what is called my good? Nameless young lady in the dark, it is most awfully kind of you, but I'm past help. How can I go out into the world without a sixpence? without decent clothes, without a single friend? I have no interest, and not much brains; all my pals at school and at Sandhurst are doing their job, and I've dropped them; never answered their letters, for I'd be ashamed to let them know I was just slacking about at home, shooting rabbits, breaking in young horses—and eating my heart out—a prisoner to poverty. There now! the dark has opened my lips *too*—I've never said as much to a living soul."

"But you can easily free yourself," said the girl with easy confidence. "You have been well educated; you are young, and strong."

"Young and strong—yes—but I've no money to make even a humble start. I had thought of going to Dublin, and getting taken on as a tram conductor,

at, say, eighteen shillings a week, but it would barely keep me, and I'm worth that at home, shooting wild duck and rabbits, an outlying Donnelly pheasant, or finding plovers' eggs, and digging potatoes. As for Mitty Flood—what beastly gossip! I hardly know her, and I don't want to know her. One day her bicycle broke down, and she asked me to help her, and when she meets me she stops to talk—that's all."

(Vera mentally decided that the bicycle was an excuse, that the meetings were *not* accidental, and that Mitty was a minx!)

"An attraction here," he continued; "why, the very idea makes me laugh. If you only knew what my life *is*, you'd laugh, too."

"I don't think I would," she protested. "I know a little about you; you know nothing of me, which is not fair, so I shall tell you who I am. My name is Vera de Lisle; my mother is related to the Donnellys; she is a widow, and I am her only child. We live in Charles Street, Mayfair, and are well off. I am eighteen—I left school last Easter. I have been presented, and to one or two balls—only mother thinks I am too young to racket about—and am to come out in earnest next season."

"Yes—and what else?"

"I like tennis and dancing, and other girls who are jolly—and dogs—no, *not* the setters. I am furious with them. Also I enjoy reading, and being alone sometimes, and having a real good long think."

"As we are being so extraordinarily outspoken, may I ask, do you think of anyone in particular—you know what I mean?"

"No one in the way you suggest—I am not a bit susceptible."

"That is to say, not *yet*, but being young, pretty, and rich, a great match will come along some day."

"If it does I shall blow it out!" she rejoined with a happy laugh.

"Are you not bored to death at Clonallon?"

"Not always. I like the old gardens, and the park, and I love this bog—somehow I find it curiously alluring; a sort of wild, out of the world, dreamy place."

After a short silence, he said:

"It is awfully good of you to take an interest in me."

"I do more," she interrupted. "I am going to offer you an idea—an idea which has just flashed into my mind: why not enlist?"

"Enlist?" he repeated; "take the King's Shilling?"

"Yes, if I were in your place I'd do it like a shot."

"Then you don't know *much* about the life of a private, do you?"

"Oh, well, if you are going to be fastidious, I say no more; but there are lots of gentlemen in the ranks, and many rankers become officers on their own merits. One of my girl friends has a brother—why"—and she paused—"there's the moon!"

Unobserved by the pair, a gradual lightening of the clouds had been steadily taking place; now these had suddenly parted, and the moon with her lidless eye stared down upon the young people—who glanced at one another interrogatively.

"Well, you have given me a lead," said Hegan, springing to his feet, "and, by Jove, I'll take it, and the King's Shilling, to-morrow."

"Oh, Mr. Hegan, perhaps I may be wrong," she protested, startled by her success. "Do not be led by me—after all, I'm little more than a school-girl. I have no real experience. Don't do anything in a hurry."

"Ah! I see your courage cannot stand the moon-

light—but your misgivings come too late. I shall sell my old ticker, also my old gun, and start off and offer myself at a cavalry dépôt. I'll apply for a regiment in India."

"I am really frightened at my presumption," she murmured.

"You need not be, I just wanted the call to start me; no one has ever spoken the word 'off' till now. This for young people is a sleepy enervating part of the world; the big trees and the water suck up vitality, and make one disinclined to rise, and be doing, and to shake off sloth. With a fairly active body I have an indolent and fatalistic mind. Miss de Lisle, I am your debtor for life."

"That remains to be seen!" she protested.

"Well"—now consulting an old silver turnip—"it is nearly seven, and I must take you home; but first of all you will have to come with me to Heganstown. I guarantee you'll see no one, and I'll get you back soon after seven, drive you over in the dog-cart, deposit you at the back gate, and leave you to manage the rest."

"Very well, I'll do whatever you wish," she replied.

"All right, then come on"—the usual British invitation—and Vera followed her new acquaintance off the rath, and in a short time found herself in an overgrown neglected avenue, leading to a great forlorn old house, that looked forbiddingly grim in the moonlight. Hegan turned the handle of the hall door, and ushered his companion into an immense vaulted hall, entirely bare of furniture.

"Just wait in here," and he opened the door into what had once been a library—a large apartment flooded by moonlight, which revealed rows of bare bookshelves and square marks on the walls, where pictures had been, and were not. The room was

empty, and apparently the house was in the same condition ; there was not a sound to be heard.

Suddenly there was a shuffling of feet, and a loud voice in the hall calling for " Rabbits—rabbits—where's them rabbits ? "

Then the door burst open, and an unwieldy female figure appeared, staggering on the threshold.

" Where's that lazy, good-for-nothing blaggard ? " she demanded.

Catching sight of Vera, she paused, stared, and then, with one ear-splitting yell, turned and fled. A few minutes after this astonishing visitor had disappeared, Hegan entered, whip in hand.

" Sorry to have kept you—I had to borrow a horse. The ' Yoke,' as they call it, awaits you."

There at the steps stood a high dogcart, with a shaggy cart-horse in the shafts, and in another moment Vera was bumping down the ill-kept drive. Either Hegan was a capital whip, or the cart-horse had a bit of pedigree, for once on the road they bowled along at a spanking pace.

" Who was the woman who came into the room ? " inquired Vera.

" My step-mother ; she took you for the family ghost—I believe she is screeching still."

Two miles were soon devoured by the cart mare's hairy legs, and as Hegan drew up at the back gate of Clonallion, he said :

" Good-bye, Miss de Lisle. We met an hour ago, and I feel as if we had known one another for years. You are my starter, and I hope I may do you credit."

" I'm afraid you must think me frightfully audacious and interfering. My mother says I am impulsive and headlong, and do rash, unexpected things. Oh, I hope I have not been extra foolish and meddlesome. Do let me hear how you get on. Will you write ? "

"If I may," he answered, secretly amazed.

"2,000, Charles Street, Mayfair. Good-bye and good luck." She held out her hand, then darted up the avenue, and was lost to sight.

Luckily the motor relayed by the fog had not yet returned, and Vera had time to don an evening frock, and sink into a chair, novel in hand, before the party arrived full of explanations and apologies.

Three days later Miss de Lisle received a note written on cheap paper, in a fine bold style :

"I have joined the Blueskin Lancers, and as soon as I am through riding school go out to India with a draft. I enclose the identical King's Shilling for your acceptance, and remain,

"Yours faithfully,

"D. HEGAN, Trooper."

Vera contrived to have a hole bored in the shilling, and wore it with other charms on her favourite bangle. The enterprise of Dermot Hegan was disclosed by Sir Domnick, always well posted in local news—*no* item too insignificant.

"So I hear that young Hegan has enlisted," he announced, "and is going out to India. Best thing he can do—wonder he never thought of it before. Just the class of chap to make his way in the service."

Dermot Hegan remained in India for four years, and made his way. His steady character, good education, and notable horsemanship helped him to a commission. He and Vera had corresponded at long and fitful intervals. When he was promoted sergeant she sent him her photograph; when he was gazetted to a regiment at home she invited him, if in London, to come and see her.

Vera was now twenty-two, her own mistress, and, as her mother bewailed, "absolutely hopeless" with

respect to a suitable marriage. Not one of her many admirers seemed to make any serious impression, and yet she was a bright, amusing, popular girl with many men friends. More than one experienced chaperone had whispered to Mrs. de Lisle that "there must be *someone* in the background!" but this suggestion she denied with passionate emphasis, saying:

"Vera has no heart, in one sense. I have never seen her really interested, and she has not been out of my sight since she left her nurse's arms."

Mr. Hegan, 50th Hussars, duly made his appearance in Charles Street, a remarkably well-set-up, smart-looking young officer, and Mrs. de Lisle—believing him to be one of Vera's partners—accorded him a gracious welcome. Presently he and her daughter retired into the back drawing-room, ostensibly to look at some photographs, and here, in a few hurried sentences, he informed Vera that his father and step-mother were both dead, that a distant relative had left him a legacy, which had enabled him to pay off some debts, and to repair the roof of Heganstown.

"I have an honest steward," he added, "and I get enough money out of the place to pay my tailor, and mess bill. I've done all right so far—and been uncommonly lucky, thanks to *you*."

"No thanks to me—thanks to this," and she exhibited her bangle, and the dangling King's shilling.

"I say, you can't think the help your letters were," he went on. "Somehow they seemed to keep me afloat; is it not funny that, until now, we have never seen one another by daylight?"

"Yes," she assented; "but all the same," and she coloured deeply, "it is not considered good manners to *stare*!"

"I beg your pardon, but my stare is excusable! I seem to know you better than anyone—and yet until now I'd only seen you by moonlight."

"That excuse is moonshine," she rejoined with a laugh.

Presently her mother came forward, and cruelly interrupted a confidential talk, saying:

"Darling, Lord Hubert has come and brought something he wants to show you." (Lord Hubert was reported to be "making the running" with the little de Lisle girl.)

Mr. Hegan was duly bidden to dinner, also to a dance given by Mrs. de Lisle, and gratefully accepted both invitations; but he soon realised the awful chasm that lay between him and an heiress. How dared *he* compete with the son of a Duke? Hopeless and heart-broken he withdrew into obscurity—that is to say, his quarters in Canterbury Barracks. When war had been declared, and his regiment was under orders, Hegan snatched an hour's leave to say good-bye to Vera—no harm in that!—and he had the good fortune to find her at home, and alone.

"So we are at war!" she exclaimed; "it seems incredible, a hideous nightmare, and I've led you into what may be battle, and sudden death."

"I'm thankful that you did—anyway, of course I'd have joined now, but I'm a more useful unit as it is. Wish me luck."

"I wish you good luck, honours, and a safe return."

"I'm not sure that that matters. You see, I've no belongings, and no one to care, if I ever come back."

"I care," she announced unexpectedly.

"Do you really mean that, Miss de Lisle?"

"Yes, I do. Oh, here's mother!" as that lady hurried into the room full of news, and excitement.

\* \* \* \* \*

After Mons, and the battle of the Aisne, Mr. Hegan, who was badly wounded, was promoted, and

got his troop. He made light of his injuries, and speedily returned to the Front. Later on, all through the dreary winter in the muddy trenches, he was cheered by Vera's letters, and through al' the rack and strain of war his unfailing spirits and infectious laugh proved an inestimable boon to his comrades. In action on the Somme he was in the thick of the hottest charges, distinguished himself amazingly; saved the life of a brother officer—but lost his own left arm.

As a certain Red Cross train reached Victoria Station, Miss de Lisle, a Red Cross nurse, was waiting to receive her friend. He had contrived to keep his injury a secret, and when she exclaimed at his empty sleeve, he said :

“ It's all right, Vera. I've brought you something in exchange—a bit of ribbon.”

“ A bit of ribbon ? ” she repeated in a doubtful tone.

“ Yes, I am proud to tell you that I have been recommended for the Victoria Cross—that is the interest on the King's Shilling ! ”

## XVI

### A DARK HORSE

WHEN Major Mahon died, he left his affairs in such desperate confusion that even a hardened Irish agent, well accustomed to family disasters and unexpected disclosures, was dumbfounded. Kil-Mahon property was mortgaged beyond recovery; the gay, hospitable, hard-riding Major had lived extravagantly and spent precisely as if his capital were a yearly income, and his income pocket-money—and after his funeral came the deluge.

The deluge, indeed! His pretty daughter, who was just twenty-one, found herself homeless, for the

ancestral mansion now belonged to creditors; there was an auction, and the family gods and heirlooms were scattered to the four winds. Her brother Tom, who was serving in India—the supposed heir to a fine fortune, and living up to the belief—was compelled to leave his regiment, and promptly return to Ireland.

Tom Mahon was a manly, good-looking young fellow of six and twenty, with typical dark blue eyes and black hair, a capital polo player, a popular officer, but never likely to ignite either the Thames or the Liffey.

Fortunately Tom was practical; he sold off his guns and ponies, paid his debts, and, when he arrived, exerted himself to the utmost to pull things together. He decided not to emigrate to Canada and take Helena with him, as their relatives so eagerly suggested (relatives who lived in England, and were aghast at the downfall of the Mahons of Kil-Mahon), but to gather what he could from the wreck, and make a home for himself and sister. They could manage on little, and were not proud. There remained an insignificant scrap of the estate (possibly overlooked) and here at least was a roof for the outcasts, for the English Mahons had with one accord washed their hands of this crazy, reckless couple. Kil-Mahon was sold to an Irish-American, who had returned to his native country with an immense hoard of dollars; but Clontra, situated on the wrong side of the same county, a good-sized ivy-covered house with its rows of small windows facing north (that ancient and surprising fashion), still belonged to the Mahons. A flower garden, a small lawn, and a thick hedge separated it from a not much frequented highroad; in a field across the way were the remains of Castle O'Mahon—cradle of the race. At the back of the house was a matted, tangled garden, a large range of

tumble-down outhouses, a few fields of fairly good pasture beyond, and, encircling house and fields, about four hundred acres of worthless bog—not the usual black bog, full of water-holes, and turf stacks, but “short grass” bog, dotted with clumps of furze bushes, and rushes, affording a certain amount of grazing for geese and donkeys.

Tom and Helena had lived two years at Clontra and effected wonders; the venerable garden was restored and prosperous; the outhouses had been patched up, the dull rooms gaily papered and made to look homely with a few odds and ends of wreckage and Helena’s clever fingers. In the yard were milch cows, and poultry; in the house several dogs and three family servants: old Pat, a handy man and groom, young Pat, gardener and herd, and Kate, the maid-of-all work—a dark little woman of forty-five, born and brought up on Kil-Mahon, a truly devout adherent of the Mahon race, a hard worker and “vocheen,” her particular and unintentionally blasphemous declaration on all occasions being, “Sure, ‘tis all the will of God!”

The cows, poultry, and garden kept the place—so to speak—going, but the life was an extraordinary change to the two Mahons. Handsome Tom, as sub. in a smart regiment, with his polo ponies, dogcart—and perhaps a certain amount of side—was now working hard to earn his bread. Helena, the admired, petted, slightly arbitrary daughter of a house whose popular, genial head was an important factor in Society, was his efficient and industrious partner.

Here the brother and sister were moored in a sort of social backwater, and more or less forgotten. It is so easy to drop out of the swim! Tom, in rough tweeds and gaiters, rose at dawn to buy and sell cattle and calves at neighbouring fairs, or superintend the gardening and the small farm—and now and

then, in the season, was offered a day's hunting or shooting by old friends.

Helena managed the dairy and poultry, sold her butter and eggs and vegetables; she had a good market at Newbridge and the Curragh. Between the young cattle, and these items, the pair paid their way, and contrived to make both ends meet. Helena's equipage was a donkey-cart or else shanks' mare, Tom rode a rickety bicycle, and they were invariably spoken of as "those poor young Mahons." All the same, they were by no means unhappy, and enjoyed excellent health and spirits, were fully employed from breakfast to supper, and had no time to meditate on their fallen fortunes. They were young and independent, they both loved animals, flowers, sport, and their own country.

"There is the baker's cart, Tom!" said his sister, rising from her exertions in weeding a flower-bed in the front garden. "Isn't it wicked to drive that poor horse!—he is dead lame in his near-fore."

"Lame, I should think so!" assented Tom, as he looked over the hedge at a heavy red bread-cart, in whose shafts a powerful black horse hobbled painfully.

"Hullo!" he shouted. The man pulled up, though the Mahons were not customers. Kate was *their* baker.

"I say, that horse of yours is very lame! Has he a stone in his hoof?" and he went to the gate.

"No, yer honour," replied the driver, "it's his corns, and they do be cruel. We've had him to the farrier—and he can do nothing whatever."

"It's a pity," said Tom, casting his eye over the animal, an upstanding, raking black who seemed in a sweat, not so much from overwork as pain; his condition was poor, and his great wild eyes wore a look of intense suffering.

"Aye, he's a powerful fine horse," continued his driver, "and a bread-cart comes strange to him, I'm thinking; you would not believe, your honour, how cruel heavy these carts does be—and it's not alone the road, but the long gentry's avenues of maybe a mile extra we does have to travel. I declare, though, this poor animal is willing, and has a grand sperrit—but what with the corns and the cart, his heart is about bruk!"

"He looks a well-bred one too," remarked Tom.

"Oh, he's that, or he'd be dead a couple of months back. I believe Broughal got him at an auction, cheap, along with a bad name. Well, well, he's nearly done, and I must be going. Good-day to yer honour," and he lumbered on.

Helena had been an attentive listener to this conversation and her heart was melted with pity. She was keenly sensitive to the sorrows of dumb animals, and the lame horse, his long rounds, distressed and haunted her thoughts. Unconsciously she came to watch for his passing in the fierce heat of a summer afternoon and to listen despite herself for the distant approaching cart and the accompanying "Clip, clop, *stop*, clip, clop, *stop*" of the poor brute that so painfully dragged it. The baker was not very punctual; sometimes it was twelve, sometimes two o'clock when he went by, but Helena was invariably there to see, and to offer the black'a bit of bread or a lump of sugar. She was so sorry for him and he seemed so grateful for her sympathy. In short, the lame black horse had become an obsession and settled upon Miss Mahon's nerves: at night she sometimes had a little private cry when she thought of him, and his existence of hopeless misery.

At last he was released, and she was relieved. For three days the baker's cart went by drawn by a mealy

bay; evidently the big black had been granted a well-earned rest.

One morning quite early Miss Mahon happened to be in the garden cutting roses, and saw—yes—the black horse passing! On this occasion he was ridden; a man had thrown a sack over his back and sat astride in an easy attitude, pipe in mouth. Alas! the black was lamer than ever! Helena waved to the rider to halt, which he did—Irish-like, only too glad of an interruption to his errand.

“Is that the horse that used to draw the bread-cart?” she asked.

“Faix it is so, me lady.”

“And where is he going?”

“Only to Rathcourt, and 'tis his last journey.”

She stared interrogatively.

“The Kennels, you know. Mr. Broughal has sold him for twenty-five shillings, and glad to be shut of him too! He's been dead lame the whole summer, and having all the bread rounds hours behind-hand, and giving great complaints, and torment; so here he goes!” and he gave the rope reins a slap.

“No, no, just wait,” she said, opening the gate and coming into the road. She laid her hands upon the animal's neck. He turned; evidently he was once accustomed to being caressed by a lady. His large intelligent eyes spoke volumes of suffering and misery.

“Do you think Mr. Broughal would let *me* have him for thirty shillings?” she asked.

“Sure, and why not? Isn't five shillings five shillings?” was the confident reply.

“Then get off, and lead him in, if you please.”

“What's all this, Helena?” asked her brother, who now appeared with the dogs at his heels.

“Oh, Tom, it's the bread-cart horse! I've just

*bought* him," she answered, looking very pale and determined.

"What?" he exclaimed, gazing at her open-mouthed.

"Listen," drawing him to one side. "He was sold for twenty-five shillings, and going to the Kennels."

"His betters have gone the same road, poor old boy. I'm sorry."

"I'm giving thirty shillings. I have it in my own private purse—egg money, you know."

"Yes," and he laughed, and nodded.

"And you, Tom—won't you give him a run on the bog till winter—let him have his shoes off, and his *chance*? If he is still a cripple you can shoot him—if not you shall ride him; you said yourself he was the plan of a well-bred hunter."

"All right, Sis, but if we are to buy and keep every old garron that passes the gate, we shall be in the poor-house sooner than ever."

"Never mind, you love horses, and we've nothing but old Dolly and Sarah for the carts; the baker is a gentleman, and if he recovers, who knows but you may ride him to hounds!"

"Ha! ha! I think I see myself on that bag of bones!"

"You may—and now I'll fetch you the money. Just wait; do *you* buy; give the man the thirty shillings, and a bottle of porter, and get a receipt."

And she flew upstairs and returned with a dirty one-pound note, and ten shillings in silver. The bargain was concluded and duly "wet" by a pint of stout, and the man, before he walked off with the sack on his back, said:

"Well—good luck to yer honour! If that black horse ever comes round—mind, I'm not saying he *will*—ye will find ye have got grand value for yer

thirty shillings; for me own part, I'm glad I'm not taking the poor baste to the hounds; and faix, even if I did, there's little on him—he just wore himself out between being so anxious to do his best, and them corns that were killing him."

There was a popular forge at a cross-road half a mile away from Clontra, and there Tom himself led the new purchase to have his shoes removed that same afternoon.

Old Jimmy was a good judge of horses, a gossip and a well-known character.

"'Tis Broughal's ould bread horse!" he exclaimed. "May I never—well, 'tis a charity to take the shoes off. Faix, I know what it is—I've bad corns meself, and I'll soon give him aise. A great horse!" he said, standing back and surveying the tall, emaciated animal—whose ribs were easily counted. "He's terrible well-bred too—Broughal got him at a sale for nothing at all—but as sure as I'm a sinner, he's a Harkaway. Will ye look at the head on him? What are ye going to do with him—is it cart, or plough?"

"He's to have a run on the bog," replied Tom. "He belongs to Miss Helena."

"The Lord love her! she's a saint! It nearly bruk me own heart to see the poor fellow limping by under two ton of a load, all this frightful hot summer. Miss Helena will get it back—and with grand interest."

But this was not Kate's (the cook's) opinion, who when she heard that her mistress had bought a great spectre of a lame black horse, was very sorrowful.

"Thirty shillings, Miss Helena! The money for your new hat for the garden-party. You can't go in the ould wan, and goodness knows what chances you've thrown behind ye! Well," piously raising her hands and eyes, "sure, 'tis all the will of God."

Tom and Helena had a busy, prosperous season. Helena's market at Newbridge and the Camp was such that she was obliged to send three carts a week with butter, eggs, vegetables, and flowers, and buy another donkey. Tom, too, had his hands full; the tide had turned, and they were both so much occupied with important matters that they entirely forgot the black horse who was enjoying a run on the bog. Tom had an old friend stationed at Newbridge, an officer in the Lancers, who made his way over to call, and though the distance was twelve Irish miles, for a reason best known to himself he returned repeatedly. One Sunday after lunch the Mahons and their guest walked down to the bog; it was the end of September, and there was an idea that it might hold a few packs of grouse. As they advanced over the springy turf, along a beaten track, then over a wobbly stick across a bog-hole, they descried, far away among the gorse and geese, a remarkably fine upstanding black horse. His attitude implied dignified expectancy, as he gazed in their direction.

"Hullo!" cried Tom. "Why, Helena—look at your purchase. I declare I scarcely know him!"

"All the better for his two months' holiday—oh, I say!" as the black suddenly wheeled about, took a wide ditch in an easy stride, and galloped off with streaming tail.

"Not much the matter with that fellow—and can't he jump!" exclaimed Captain Forde. "Your property, Miss Mahon?"

"Yes, and, do you know, I'd almost forgotten him."

"I advise you not to do that—he looks like a chaser."

"A chaser!" she repeated with a laugh. "I bought him out of a bread-cart ten weeks ago. I pitied him so much because he had so many miles to

go every day, and he was so terribly lame. They were sending him to the Kennels. His price was thirty shillings—and Tom gave him a run here."

"Good gracious! You are not serious? This is one of your Irish jokes."

"I say, Helena, we'll have him up and look at him," said Tom; "Tony shall vet. him; he is great on horses."

"All right—we will send down old Pat with a head-stall, and interview the Baker after tea."

The Baker, seduced by the sight of a bucket, looking wild, rough, and happy, was duly brought up, examined, trotted to and fro—and passed.

"Have him in, and ride him about quietly, Tom," urged his adviser, "you are such a nice light weight. He looks a hunter all over—and something more; but time will tell."

"Then you think he was a bargain?" said Helena.

"I'm sure of it," he answered with emphasis, "sound—up to weight—rising seven—and uncommonly good-looking. Look here, Miss Mahon, if you are inclined to sell I'll give you sixty pounds for him just as he stands—without his shoes."

"Sixty pounds! No, no, I don't want to sell him or rob you," she answered, "and he will be something for Tom to ride—he hates a bike—and the black looks such a gentleman."

"He is, I'll bet. I suppose you don't know his pedigree?"

"No, I'm afraid we can't trace that beyond the bread-cart."

"I shall always take an interest in your horse, Miss Mahon, and Tom, my advice to you is, bring him in at once."

"Come over and see how he turns out."

"I'm sure the poor Baker will be sorry we happened to notice him to-day," said Helena, "and took him

away from the nice short grass and bog—and his two dear donkeys."

Within a week the Baker was carefully shod by old Jimmy, and put into regular work. He proved a delightful mount, and seemed thoroughly to appreciate being ridden, especially on the turf, and popped over fences with an agility that spoke of practice.

"I declare, Sis," said her brother after a rousing gallop round the fields, "you are a witch. This horse is a treasure and worth a pot of money. I shall school him a little, hunt him, and if he turns out well, will enter him for some of the big races at Leopards-town and Punchestown—and we will keep him *dark*—back him—and make our fortunes."

Jimmy Horrigan, the blacksmith, was also a sincere admirer of the Baker, and on Sundays would come up to the stable, lean on the half-door, pipe in mouth, and talk him over with old Pat.

"He is a great plan of a horse, and I was watching him being schooled, and begor ! I never ask to see a better lepper, bold and quick and safe as the Rock of Cashel. Faix, he would make a big bid for the Grand National." Seeing young Mahon approach, he said, "Come here to me now, Mr. Tom, till I tell ye something."

"What is it, Jimmy ? "

"Ye have a fortune here in the black horse."

"I know that."

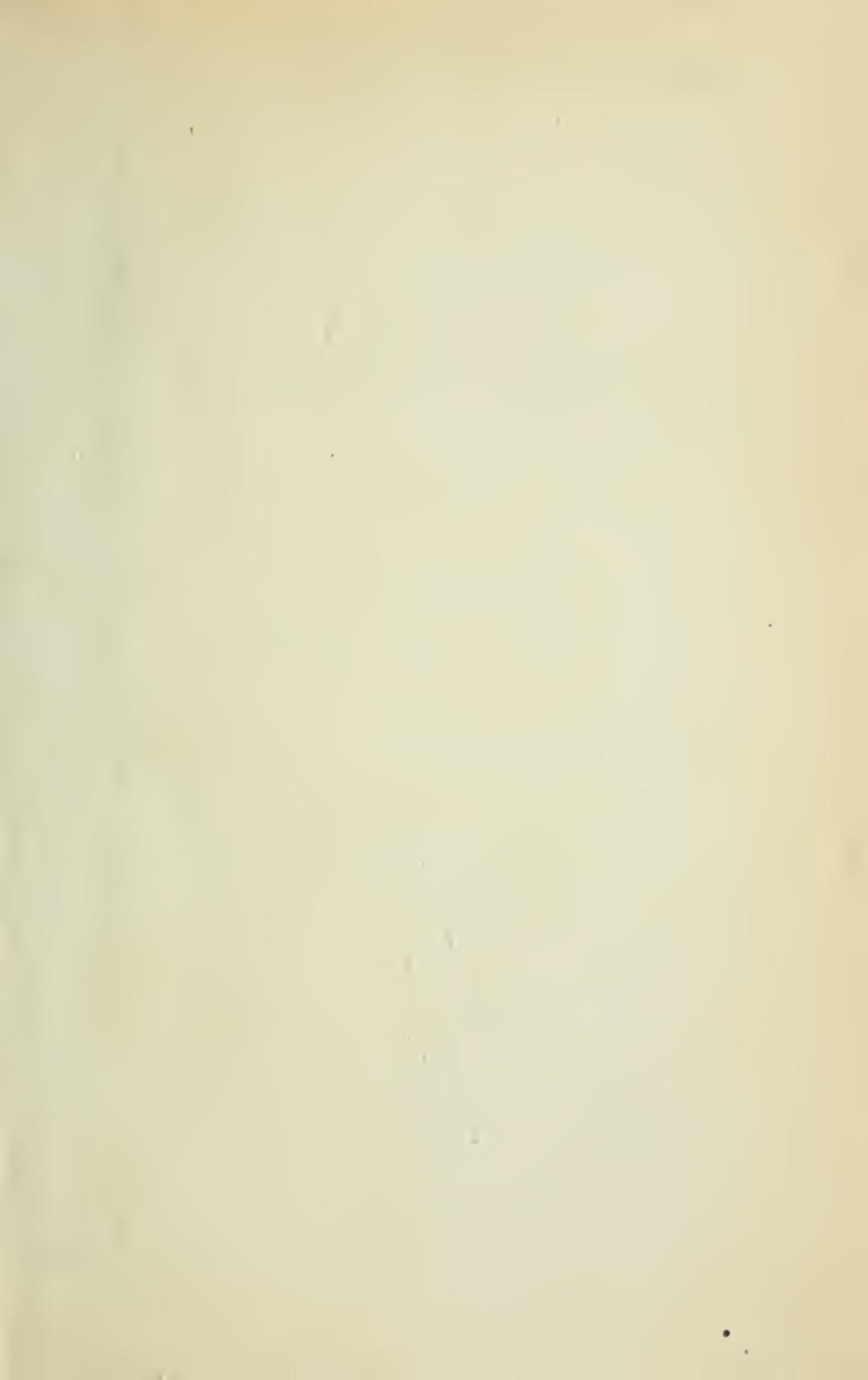
"But ye don't know everything," waxing confidential and speaking behind his hand. "Lately it has been put in me way to open yer eyes. Ye mind Mr. Grady who died a couple of years back and the grand auction of his horses—pedigree mares, foals, and chasers ? This horse here," nodding over the half-door, "was in that sale—and sold by mistake."

"How do you make that out ? "

"It was a big business—two days—and the last day, when it was getting darkish, a groom who had taken drink mixed two lots, Sarsfield and his half-brother—the dog-cart horse. Some poor devil bought him for Sarsfield, who had a great character though untried, and paid a long price and got properly stuck, and afterwards made a terrible rebellion with the auctioneer, who faced it down that it *was* Sarsfield he had. Howsomever the real Sarsfield was gone, and could never be traced, though he had a funny little mark on his hoof. I've made out he was sold to a Dublin jarvey for twenty-five sovereigns, being real smart looking, but he made matches of the car, and put the fear of death on the driver, who passed him to a canal boatman, and bedad ! he kicked *him* into the water. I can't rightly tell you where he went to next, but, after a long while, Broughal the baker bought him for a matter of five pound ; he was in low condition, and, says he, he won't rise his heels in the bread-cart, and the long and the short of it is that I'm thinking you have the lost Sarsfield snug here in a loose box. The other day I noticed the print on him, and bedad, ye've a rare bargain for yer thirty shilling. The Grady stable had terrible high hopes of him, though he was delicate and kep' back ; and all you and Miss Helena has got to do now is to sit tight, and go in and win."

The Baker was hunted all the winter, and it would be hard to say which—he or Tom Mahon—enjoyed the season the more heartily. He was entered for several events, was put into hard training and galloped upon that most elastic of turf, the Curragh of Kildare. Subsequently he won, as a complete outsider, a big race at Punchestown, others at Lincoln and Liverpool, and within twelve months, in bets and stakes, ten thousand pounds for his grateful owners : in short, he restored their fortunes.

The Baker is now a pensioner, the Mahons having refused to part with him, even for a tempting price. He spends his summer on the bog in company with a donkey, his old companion; in winter, he occasionally appears at Meets, and goes admirably in a short run—just to show the younger performers how the thing should be done! On such occasions he is pointed out to strangers as that celebrated chaser, the Baker; but the story of the baker's cart, and his reputed price of thirty shillings, is looked upon as an amusing fiction.



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